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HEROIC

THE MIGHT AND MAJESTY OF **THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM**

Is the largest and most layered game of 2011 also the best? On p46 we go hands-on with the most epic adventure in Bethesda's storied history to discover how the studio is rewriting the open-world RPG

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INSIDE THE MOST POWERFUL FRANCHISE IN VIDEOGAMES

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The battle has ended. We're all geeks now



When the halls of **Edge** HQ are filled with discussion about George RR Martin's A Song of Ice qnd Fire series of novels, it's to be expected. We're easy prey for such tales of high fantasy, softened up by years of exposure to polyhedral dice, dog-eared D&D modules and so many roleplaying videogames filled with skittering rats, glimmering plate armour and mead by the flagonful. When you keep seeing 'normal' folk cradling the books as they go about their journeys on the Tube, however, it's clear that something strange is afoot. The whole world is getting a bit beardy.

As the catalyst for the massmarket popularisation of the original novels, the terrific Game Of Thrones has a lot to answer for. Certainly Bethesda execs must be clinking glasses over the job HBO has done in building a broader audience for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (see p46).

Not that the game feels like it needs much help. Bethesda has built a reputation on the back of delivering open-ended playscapes, but *Skyrim* stands as if it exists on a different plane to that inhabited by other games. It even makes it predecessor, 2006's *Oblivion*, one of the most notorious time sinks in gaming history, feel just a little bit flimsy.

In one sense, *Skyrim* doesn't feel new at all, more a manifestation of the fantasy RPG that's been playing in our imaginations all these years. Finally, videogame technology, and Bethesda's ambition and resources, have caught up with what's been in our heads going all the way back to the 1980s and games such as *Ultima*, *Wizardry* and *The Bard's Tale*. Becoming aware of the danger of a fast-moving shape in the sky as you traverse an open plain is a unique sensation thanks to the astonishing fidelity of this world and your relationship with it. Following the dragon's descent and then engaging it in battle feels like a kind of wish fulfillment.

Can the game as a whole live up to what's suggested by our preview experience? We'll find out soon – the game arrives on November 11. Until then, some more time spent in the land of Westeros will have to suffice.



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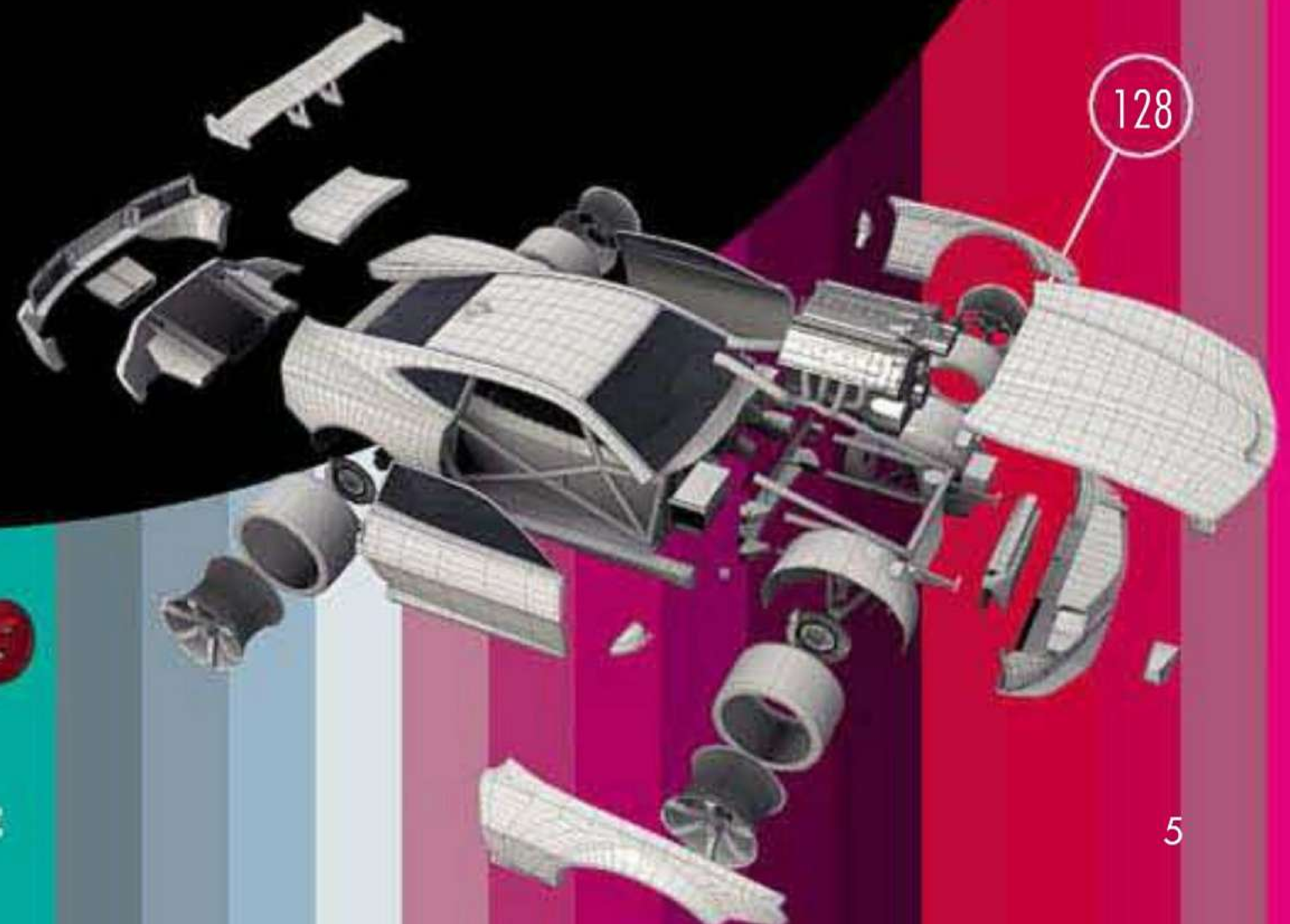
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XBOX LIVE

XBOX 360







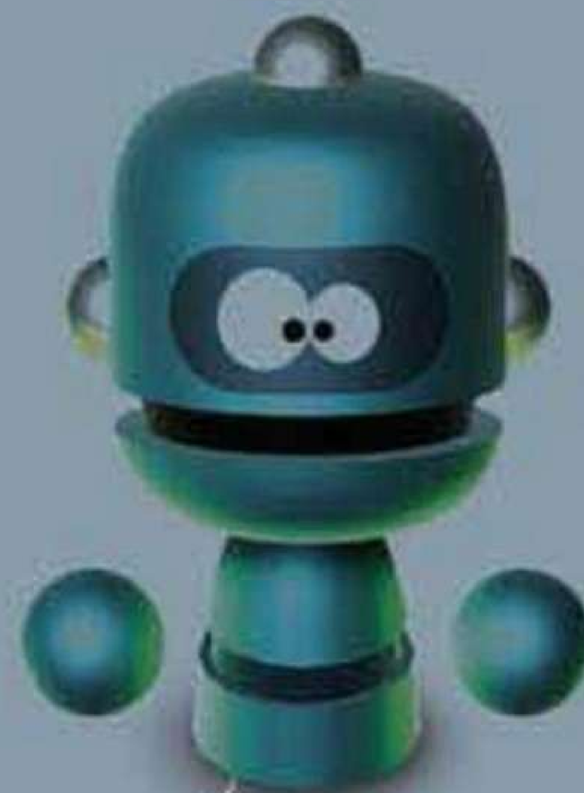

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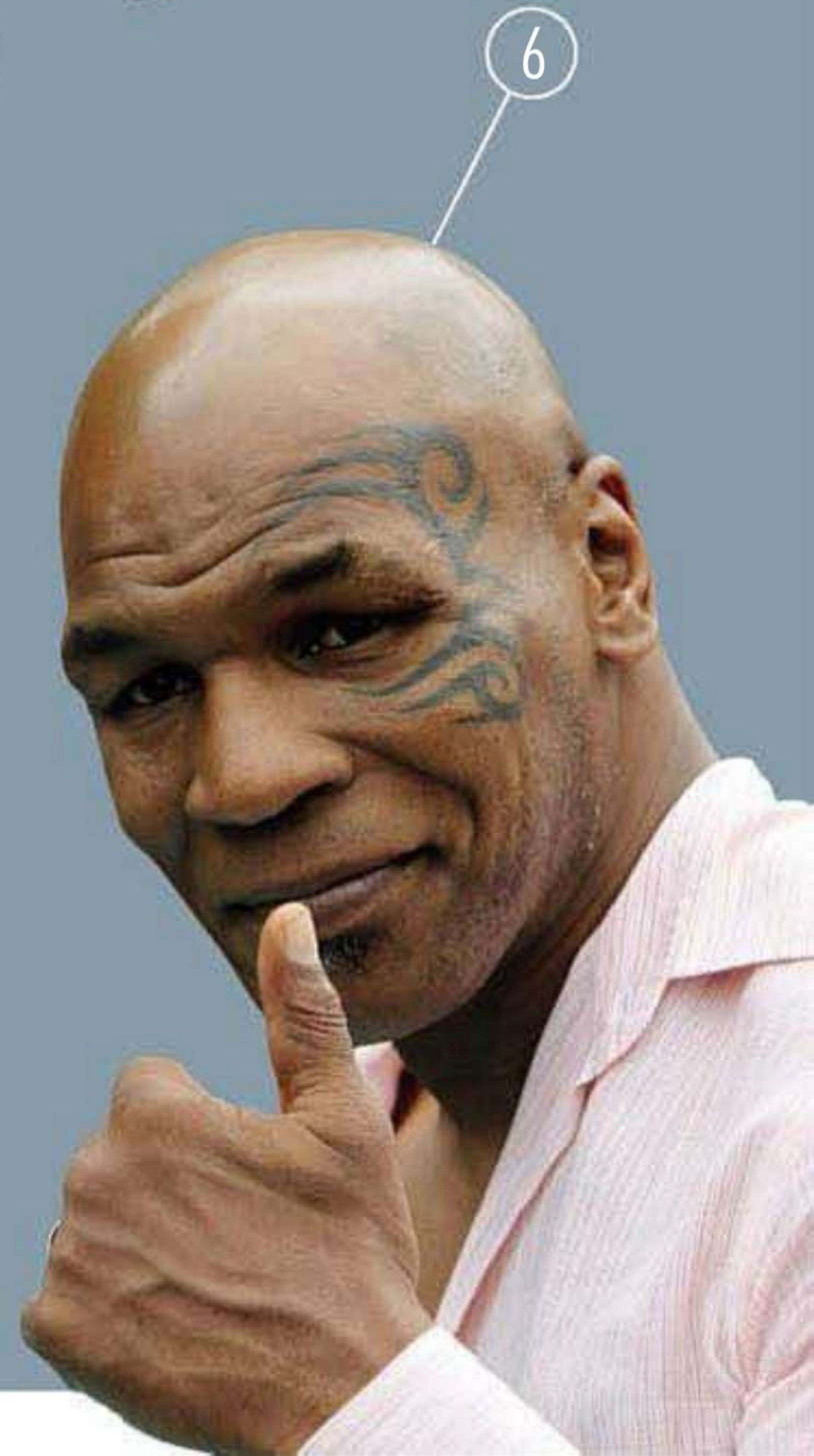
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WLEDGE

With shops and download platforms groaning under the weight of new HD remakes (1) we investigate on p12 the challenges developers face to remaster games for 720p properly. Kim Swift (2) saw her work get remastered when Valve turned *Narbacular Drop* into *Portal*. Now she has left Valve to found Airtight Games, we speak to her about the studio's first title, *Quantum Conundrum*, on p16. The CG trailer (3) is now a fixture in the promotional schedule of most big new titles, but are trailers writing cheques the games can't cash? We talk to trailer producers on p18 to find out more. Then, on p20, we look at Denki's words and war iOS game *Quarrel* (4). Development manager Gary Penn talks us through its mix of Risk and Scrabble, and shows other devs how a headshot photo should be taken. Deep under London something nasty stirred when theatre company Punchdrunk took us on a live-action walkthrough inspired by *Resistance 3* called …And Darkness Descended (5) We tell the tale on p22, (and we're sorry we tried to break the set). Among p24's Soundbytes, Mike Tyson (6) describes the particular delight of sharing videogames with his children, and Cliff Bleszinski calls all Pokémon assholes. And finally, in My Favourite Game, Dominic Aitchison from guitar rock band Mogwai (7) explains his love for *Ocarina Of Time* and playing *Geometry Wars 2* on tour.



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Up-to-the-minute game news and views

Slaves to the remaster

Rehashed oldies are all the rage, but what separates the good, the bad and the downright blasphemous?

HI-DEF HORROR
Capcom's HD re-release of *Resident Evil 4* for PS3 (confusingly, without Move support) and 360 is a mixed bag of refreshed detail and low-res textures. Yes, characters look crisp, the open-space environments are sharp and the action has never whipped along at such a pace, but in accentuating the positives of this survival horror classic, HD also highlights a few ugly negatives. Interior textures, whether it be doors, walls or furniture, look rough, and onscreen text – bar the trader's inventory – has remained untouched by the grace of pin-sharp HD remastering. Still, the head-popping shock opera has never looked better.



Everything's already been done," rants **Tom Sizemore** in Strange Days, a movie about VR junkies and social entropy on the eve of the 21st century. "Every kind of music's been tried, every kind of government's been tried, every fucking hairstyle, bubble gum flavour, breakfast cereal… How are we gonna make another thousand years?" The answer, we're now discovering, is to revive the previous 50.

HD remakes are just the latest avenue through which gaming's past is being rebranded and repriced for the present. And that's not all: "Given the multi-generational maturity of many franchises, plus the scale of both investment and ongoing return involved, and the opportunities presented by connected devices and online services, we're seeing an unprecedented amount of regurgitation, rediscovery, emulation, remixing and updating taking place right now," says Screen Digest analyst **Steve Bailey**. "HD collections make sense under this umbrella, especially with backwards compatibility on the HD consoles being so half-cocked."

Let's run through them quickly. Available by the end of September will be *God Of War Collection*, *Dead Space: Extraction*, *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* 'HD Classics', *Resident Evils Code Veronica* and *4*, *Perfect Dark*, *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath* (as part of the Oddboxx pack on PC), *Bionic Commando: Rearmed*, *God Of War: Origins Collection* (the PSP games), *No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise*, *Beyond Good & Evil HD*, *Prince Of Persia Trilogy*, *Splinter Cell Trilogy* and *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time*. Coming soon: *House Of The Dead: Overkill – Extended Cut*, *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection*, *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary*, *Zone Of The Enders HD Collection*, *Silent Hill HD Collection*, *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath* (on PS3). More will have been announced while you're reading this.

Inevitably, some of these are better ported or better suited to being ported than others. Just Add Water's version of *Stranger's Wrath* was a disaster on PC, released as part of the Oddboxx in time for Steam's summer sale, but in no fit state. It tarnished the game's legacy. Meanwhile, years of bad ports and PC mods have showed that *Resident Evil 4* needs more than just a higher resolution and sharper textures (which the upcoming remake doesn't feature anyway) to avoid looking worse in 720p. And is 720p even HD enough nowadays? Who knows what HD means any more, and who cares?

> "For God Of War, we got a big virtual knife and chopped off their entire renderer and replaced it"

We know someone. Bluepoint Games has fast emerged as a name you can trust in this re-release melee. One of the few to turn around its PSN debut (*Blast Factor*) in time for the service's launch, it caught the attention of leads at Sony Santa Monica keen to commission HD remakes of the first two *God Of War* games. The third was on its way for Q4 of 2009 (but arrived in March the following year), while the second had released late in PS2's lifecycle, so the idea made artistic and commercial sense.

"[Santa Monica's] internal team would have taken longer, basically; bigger teams have got more inertia," explains Bluepoint's president, **Andy O'Neil**. "It was a very difficult timeline, but a nice clean codebase. Let's just say there were some bets placed on whether this would get done on time or not, but we got it done and worked hard to pay attention to the detail."

To say the devil is in those details would be an understatement, and many critics of HD remakes aren't even that generous. People underestimate the work they require, O'Neil believes.

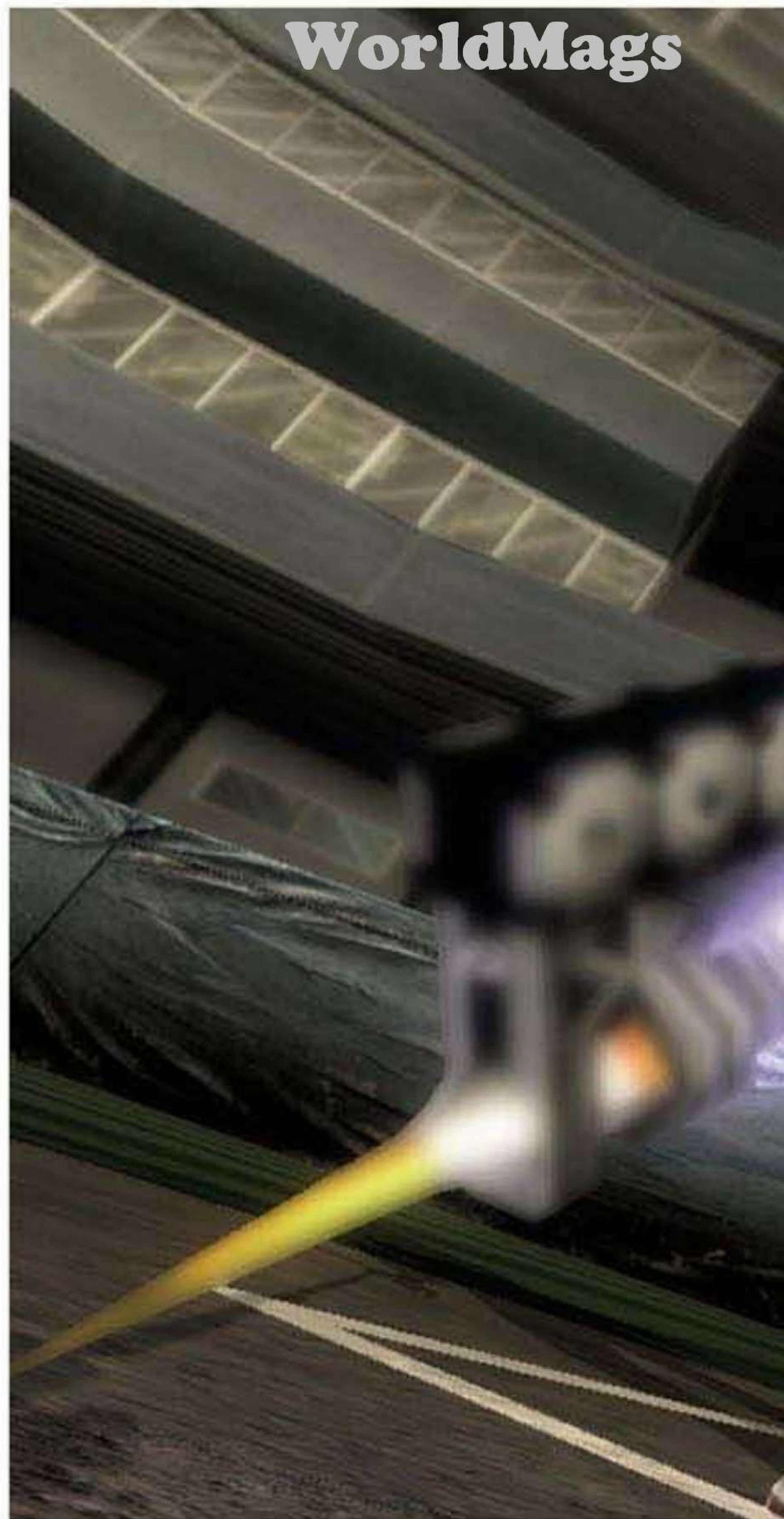
"The problem with source asset drops is that you don't know if it's the final shipped data. Because people will go and make last-minute changes. They might have done it on the build machine, on a local drive, or done something weird so it didn't get backed up. So what we do is take the retail disc and reverse-engineer it, pull all the data off that. For *God Of War*, we actually got a big virtual knife and chopped off their entire renderer and replaced it with ours."

That was the easy part. We don't have the extra 2,000 words to tell the full story, but the short version involves a lack of IEEE-compliant maths on PS2, meaning divide-by-zero glitches on PS3, and no palletised textures on PS3, which turns a 32k PS2 texture into a 1.3Mb one to be streamed from an optical drive that only runs "about ten per cent faster". Then there was a lack of source assets for

Bluepoint has fixed a few glitches and cheats for the HD revival of *Shadow Of The Colossus*. With 3DTV support, the remake also promises a new sense of scale for the mammoth adventure







ABOVE *Beyond Good & Evil HD* renders at 1080p and adds Achievements and leaderboard support. No apparent fix for the camera, though. RIGHT The upcoming *Halo: CE Anniversary* will enable players to switch between the old Xbox engine and shinier new graphics on a whim

heavily post-processed cinematics; 50 and 60Hz PAL localisations, which took up an entire Blu-ray; and missing fonts.

This, O'Neil says, "takes loads of low-level skills. I think the average [number of] years of experience needed is 15 to 16. And we've got two technical directors working on the current one [*Metal Gear Solid HD Collection*]. They're all technical directors from big places with years of experience in Assembler. Because if you don't do that, you're going to get in a big mess. You make one mistake and it kills it."

The studio's next job, the Team Ico HD Classics collection, makes *God Of War* look simple. Bluepoint spends a month evaluating HD remake requests, looking at factors such as artistic merit, present-day singularity and complexity. For two weeks, *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* were touch-and-go.

"Japanese developers have a very different philosophy," O'Neil explains. "They use Linux, to start off with. So you get the first drop and have to find a Japanese version of that. And they use an unusual build pipeline." This time the brief summary of the issues encompasses differences in fill rate between PS2 (higher) and PS3, having to decipher two vastly different games, getting *Ico* running in 1080p, issues with PS3 transparency handling, and a piecemeal, painstaking approach to replacing the renderer.

Chief technical officer **Marco Thrush** elaborates: "The main difference to *God Of War* is that we got the [*GOW*] code and could just drop it into Windows Compiler and run it. But with *Shadow*, it was developed on Linux computers throughout the whole development. There was only ever one platform. So once we tried to compile it, there were thousands of Assembler functions that simply didn't compile. We could run the *God Of War* games on day one, but *Shadow* took a lot longer."

Quite what was really said when, with the game finally running at an elusive 30fps, Sony asked about 3DTV support is unknown, but probably





Facelifts aren't new for *Metal Gear Solid*, Hideo Kojima having worked with Silicon Knights to ensure *MGS: The Twin Snakes* looked great on GameCube. Above left is *Peace Walker* PSP, with its PS3 incarnation right

No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise shows how time is no longer a factor in remake selection, much of which is thanks to the influence of Nintendo's Wii. Coming in just a bit too late for a 'port', this one adds bosses and new play modes

unpublishable. O'Neil's official version is: "'Ooh, that sounds really interesting, but really *hard*, because we've got to run everything twice when it's already hammering the crap out of the hardware.

"So we just started offloading crazy amounts of stuff on to the SPUs, just to free up the RSX [PS3's graphics chip] enough to do it. Another problem is that you've got to adjust the focal distance to determine how strong the effect is, and a lot of games in 3D don't work very well."

Thrush agrees: "The standard approach is you just put the focal point on the player and give the player a depth slider to adjust the strength of distortion. But as soon as you get anything close to the camera, your eyes can't focus, you get window violation stuff."

Back to O'Neil: "We wanted to make it something that made the game better, so we came up with this technique where we analyse the scene, the Z-buffer, and figure out what's close to the player, where the player is, what the range of depth in the scene is. Then we can automatically calculate the focal point, the distortion effects, the strength of distortion, so they don't make the player feel bad."

The results, he adds, are unique to each game, *Ico* becoming a kind of 'magic box' due to its interiors and camera, while *Shadow Of The Colossus* gets even more colossal – the awesomeness of your approaching prey turning to vertigo as you angle towards its weakspots. Such a thorough exploitation of the source material would be, let's say, 'troublesome' without that aggressive approach to bugs and glitches.

"We can calculate the focal point, the [3D] distortion effects, so they don't make the player feel bad"

Knowing how to fix whatever problems come up, however invisible the results might be to the average player, is hard. Knowing if they *should* be fixed, however, requires a constant dialogue between Bluepoint, its publisher and a game's creator.

"We'll say: 'We've found this problem – do you want us to fix it?' Because there are a few bugs and cheats in the original PAL version [of *Shadow Of The Colossus*] that we fixed, and that will upset a few people, possibly. But it was a deliberate decision: this can break the game, so let's do subtle things so people can't take advantage of it. But we won't change anything without talking to the original developers."

A 'lazy' HD update, then, probably wouldn't work in the first place. O'Neil would sooner blame lack of time, budget or due diligence for the ones that 'go wrong', especially when porting from difficult platforms. And, of course, "there are games where it's really low-poly, or where there are low-res textures or just bad art direction. If it didn't look awesome for a PS2 game, it's not going to magically have a shine on it now." ■



SLIGHT RETURN
Just how much money do remakes make? 'Enough' is about as far as research firm EEDAR's VP **Jesse Divinch** (above) is willing to speculate on the matter. "When we see remakes… I don't think the publisher is ever hoping for a strong revival in sales," he says. "Rather, they're hoping to capture a small market of diehard fans and those who didn't own the needed entertainment device – eg, a PS2 – when it was originally released. It's cheap, distribution costs are low and the margins are high – why wouldn't a publisher explore this option?"

Very theoretical physics

Kim Swift's PAX surprise takes the puzzle genre to new dimensions

It's hard not to be a little envious of **Kim Swift**. While she was a student at the DigiPen Institute of Technology, she and her team were personally asked by Gabe Newell to recreate their then-current project, a small title that used dimensional gateways to solve puzzles, with Valve's Source engine. As an employee at Valve, Swift was influential in the development of *Portal* (and also worked on the *Half-Life* and *Left 4 Dead* series, among other things). When she left the company to become lead designer at Airtight Games in 2009, it was anyone's guess what she would do next. Now, Swift seems to be in the business of making exactly the kind of games she wants to make.

Announced at the Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) in Seattle, Swift's first game with Airtight, *Quantum Conundrum*, may feel familiar to Aperture Science's loyal test subjects. It's another cerebral puzzle-platformer, this time focusing on flip-flopping between physics-altering dimensions rather than popping handy ovals out of space-time – and one whose offbeat humour and approach revolve around what's evidently a recurring theme in Swift's games: science.

"I like playing around with sci-fi clichés," Swift says of *Conundrum*'s conceit, which she explains came to her while walking one day to her local bakery. "[But] instead of just having [sci-fi ideas] be something you do on the side, you want to actually feature the game around them – so *Portal* was all about using portals, but *only* portals, really, to solve the puzzles. They weren't just cool doors for you to walk through."

The fabric of *Conundrum* is close to the cloth from which *Portal* was cut, although its personality and approach are more outwardly whimsical. After a behind-closed-doors demo with Swift before the game made its public debut during PAX, we come away intrigued.

> Each dimension imbues your surroundings with properties such as reversed gravity or slowed time

You play the nephew of mad scientist Professor Quadwrangle, a brilliant genius who has converted his manor house into an experimental playground, and who conveniently goes missing at the beginning of the game. Quadwrangle's latest invention is a glove that enables you to dynamically shift between various dimensions. Each imbues your surroundings with properties such as reversed gravity, slowed time and, in one instance, fluffiness. The glove is the key to finding Quadwrangle, and you do so in *Portal*-like fashion, navigating the professor's vast manor, puzzle by puzzle and room by room.


Kim Swift, design lead at Airtight Games


bit.ly/qconundrum
More screenshots of Quantum Conundrum

Swift likens *Conundrum*'s dimensional shifting to a complex version of switching in and out of the spectral realm in Crystal Dynamics' *Soul Reaver* series: "Instead of just saying: 'I'm in the ghost dimension now and I'm wandering around [it] like in *Legacy Of Kain*.' It was a fun game, but I want to see more, what other things I could do in different dimensions."

The tone in *Conundrum* is also markedly lighter than *Soul Reaver*'s. In the fluffy dimension, for instance, everything onscreen takes on the soft, blueish-white properties of a quilt, allowing you to pick up and throw heavy objects before switching back to normal. Swift also makes sure to point out the game's humour to us. As you explore the manor, you'll come across various portraits of the


Flipping between dimensions affects whole rooms, not just a small chunk of space. What's more, the scenery will reflect the dimension

professor, his pet cat and various other creatures, all of which change according to the dimension you're in. So if Quadwrangle is affecting a brash, cartoonish appearance in the normal dimension, he might be flying in reverse gravity, or impatiently looking at his watch in the slow-motion dimension. In fluffy dimension? He wears a bunny suit.

"We wanted the game to be fun and quirky and make you laugh on a very visceral level," Swift explains. "Fluffy dimension is a little over the top and silly. But it's fun."

That's not to say it's easy. As with any good puzzler, the mechanics become more complicated over time. And as gameplay increasingly becomes about negotiation between dimensions, a complex and, surprisingly, somewhat open-ended solution structure emerges.

"The more dimensions you add, the more permutations [add] complexity in terms of: 'How do I use this dimension or this dimension and then these two dimensions with the different objects in the room?'" Swift says. "But we definitely have a nice learning curve for players."

By the end of our demo, the dimension switching had ballooned into sequences using four of the five planned dimensions. Safes were thrown in their fluffy state, became platforms in slow motion and were later used to make anti-gravity arcs created by toggling back and forth between the reverse-gravity and regular dimension to 'surf' across chasms.

Does Swift think gamers will take to *Quantum Conundrum*'s cutesy trappings as readily as they did the Weighted Companion Cube? "I like making bets that gamers will like things that are fluffy or that have hearts on them," she laughs. "It hasn't let me down yet." ■



Fitz Quadwrangle and his nephew are scheduled to appear across PC, XBLA and PSN in 2012



















Trails of terror

Are prerendered CG game trailers false prophets or free entertainment?

Dead Island's promotional trailer (above), created by Glasgow-based studio Axis Animation, made a splash seven months ago. Partly because the trailer displayed unusually high craftsmanship, partly because its story of a child's death sparked an industry-wide debate on tasteful advertising, and partly because the promotion failed to include actual footage of the game. With *Dead Island* now available on retail shelves, we can compare the two and learn if the sexy tease promoted a comparable experience.

There are many immediately noticeable discrepancies between videogame and promotional trailer. In the game, the primary action doesn't occur in slow-motion or in reverse. Nor is the story that of a doomed little girl. *Dead Island*'s plot hinges on four wise-cracking protagonists – the upwardly mobile receptionist, the fading rap star, the retired NFL player and the child-molester-neutering ex-cop – who unite to exterminate the undead population of a tropical resort hotel.

However different in plot, form and aesthetic, both imagine a picturesque vacation spoiled by a gaggle of reanimated corpses. And that, in the opinion of its creators, was the intention.

"[We] set out to create a trailer that would capture what it would be like to survive a zombie infestation," says **Richard Scott**, executive producer at Axis Animation. "To me, this is clearly what the *Dead Island* game is about. Survival."



Richard Scott, executive producer at Axis Animation

This sort of trailer is becoming the norm: straightforward, beautiful and void of anything to tell you that what's being trumpeted is a videogame. *Dead Island* has perhaps the most recognisable example, but Axis, along with the California-based Blur Studios, has made a cottage industry out of similar work.

"I think that any trailer, whether for a movie, TV show or game, is designed to do two things," Scott says. "It's designed to feed the existing fans' desire to know more and see great content. It's



FORCE FEEDBACK

Are CGI shorts the future of Star Wars films?



Imagine a computer-animated Star Wars prequel. Not that Clone Wars kids' stuff, but a grim epic replete with thousand-person battles between Jedi and Sith. That is the promise of the *Star Wars: The Old Republic* trailer series, created by Blur Studios to promote Electronic Arts' upcoming MMOG. Unfortunately, to say the animation is visually representative of the game it's promoting would be like claiming a homemade ossobuco pleases the palate like a can of tinned spaghetti. But perhaps this is how we'll get the next great Star Wars film. In five-minute advertorial chunks.

also designed to cross the product over into places where it can create new fans and grow its own audience."

Scott doesn't mention parity, perhaps because one-for-one correlations between an ad and its subject are no longer important for success.

The *Dead Island* trailer was successful, both on Scott's terms and the traditional understanding of what constitutes a good advertisement. Practically every big gaming Web site hosted the footage, which was expected. What was unexpected was how the 24-hour news cycle, allergic to most game news, chomped into the imagery, inadvertently getting the footage in front of millions of viewers. And in June the short won gold at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity.

> "Marketing sophistication and production values have increased in line with the games themselves"

Scott believes trailers have evolved, becoming more sophisticated in order to compete not just with other products but also other methods of advertising. "With games being a cornerstone of the entertainment industry they need to compete on the same marketing levels as movies, television and music," he says. "This, however, isn't specific to CGI trailers, this is across the board. Sophistication and production values in marketing have increased in line with the increases in production values in the games themselves."

Today, publishers sniff out new methods with which to introduce their wares to additional customers. Take, for example, Activision's broadening of the *Call Of Duty* brand through creative, expensive and experimental marketing: the publisher runs ads in the NBA Playoffs; maintains Call Of Duty Elite, a singular social networking platform; publishes One Of Swords, an internally operated games blog; and created Call Of Duty XP, an elaborate conference for fans recently held in Los Angeles and featuring a performance by Kanye West.

Publishers want to meet people everywhere, not just in trade mags. And the CG trailer, though not as glitzy as a rap concert, is proving effective for those publishers on a more modest budget. The trailer is familiar to anyone who's been to the movies, digestible and easily distributable.

Today, the *Dead Island* trailer has over 5.6 million views on YouTube. It's so popular that it's preceded by an advertisement. Scott confesses that Axis doesn't possess a secret to sending YouTube hits into the millions. Engage and entertain: those words make the firm sound less like it's in marketing and more like the creative developers it's contracted to promote.

If consumers retract from marketing and flock to novel advertainment, studios like Axis will prosper. And so the divide grows between product and promo, and dwindles between artist and ad man. ■

Mind games

Denki's Gary Penn on why Quarrel's AI players had to be a little bit stupid

Quarrel, Denki's sprightly mash-up of Risk and Boggle, has been a long time in the making. The project's difficult transition from multiplayer XBLA game to singleplayer iOS puzzler required some fascinating solutions. Here, **Gary Penn**, Denki's internal development manager, discusses how *Quarrel* almost ran aground, and whether his cast of logophiles could pass the Turing Test.

Quarrel was announced in 2009 as an XBLA game, and then it all went quiet. What happened?

At Denki, someone came along with this idea to mix *Dice Wars* with a word game, and we thought that sounded pretty cool. Initially the game was hex-based, and there was a Desperate Housewives theme. That was OK as a prototype, but I thought it would be good to test it as a boardgame first. Desperate Housewives was pushed to one side, and we started focusing more on troops and units.

We weren't sure about what format it was going to go on. Microsoft was trying to make the Xbox more family-friendly at the time, and they thought *Quarrel* was really interesting. But they changed their strategy and everything fell apart. By that point, we'd invested in Xbox, but we couldn't get the slot on XBLA because we hadn't published enough stuff on the console already. It was a difficult time. We hawked *Quarrel* around after that, and it came really close to final terms a few times. Then the global recession happened, and that really didn't help matters. It's a hard sell.

> "It's all about performance. If you think about the best players, they're often quite stupid"

Was the game originally focused on being a multiplayer experience?

Having worked on multiplayer games before, I'm aware that they're very different beasts and you have to treat them as separate games. The game we wanted to make sure worked first was the multiplayer one. The boardgame worked enormously well for that. Even if we never ended up doing multiplayer, we wanted to make sure it worked. We're still really keen to roll out multiplayer versions, too. It just comes down to timing and an interest in doing them.

After the switch to a singleplayer strategy, how did you make playing against AI as interesting as playing against people?

One of the guiding lights from the beginning of *Quarrel* was that we wanted you to feel that you were playing against real people. We have nine characters. We prototyped about three dozen: we watched people play, and we started to notice archetypes. So I'm a very aggressive player with a good vocabulary, but I'm strategically rubbish. We also found players who were quick, but who had quite small vocabularies. We used these sort of things to feed into the artificial players. So the performances are all based on real people. It's not some clever algorithm: it's just the habits people have and the skills they display. They also react to situations with a pretty base but effective series of emotions they run through depending on the context.

I worked on a game years ago called *Wild Metal Country*, and that had some really fantastic AI in it, but nobody who played it ever knew. That's the problem. It's almost like an actor performing internally. It's not for the audience at all. The problem becomes: how do you dramatise and amplify that? It's not about intelligence. It's all about performance. If you think about the best players you ever play, they're often quite stupid. The good players are really boring. You need points of frailty, weaknesses that you might be able to exploit. I don't think of them as AIs, I think of them as artificial players. There's an element of theatre to it.



Gary Penn, internal development manager, Denki



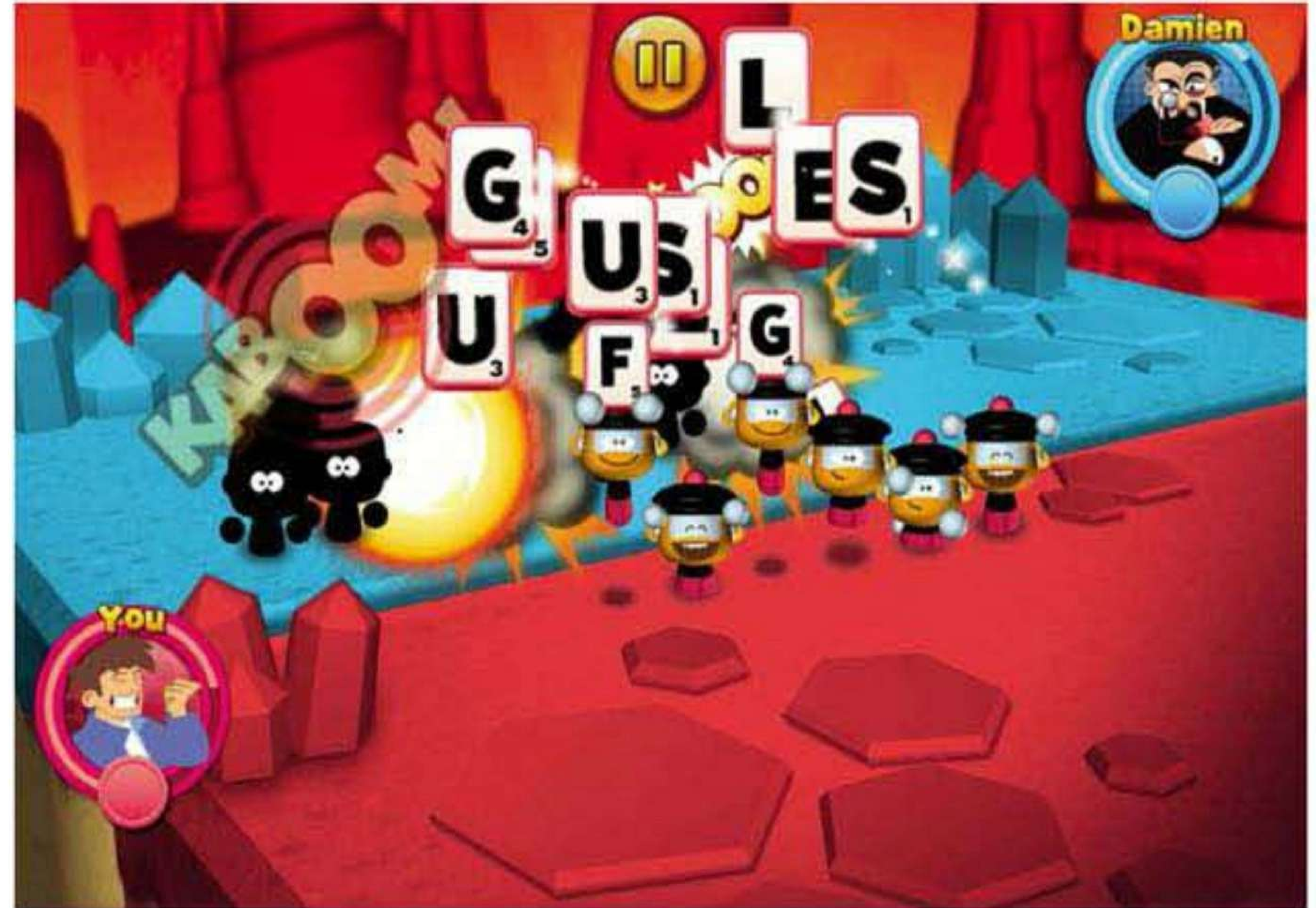
Does focusing on characters stop players thinking that the AI is either cheating or holding back?

We did some blind testing, and people thought they were real. Testers thought the real people were fake, and the fake people were real, so that was great. We were looking for strong dramatic traits with our characters: players who are bullies, and all they do is attack other players, or the bookworm, who knows all these obscure words – they're not necessarily the best words, they're just really obscure. We use the official Scrabble dictionary, which has about 115,000 words, and we tagged the words in terms of complexity. Tier-one words are about a six-year-old's vocabulary. Tier-two are words you've probably heard of: you'd probably use it in a sentence and cross your fingers. Then there's this upper tier of 70,000 words, and they're basically "WTF, there's no way that that's a word". Out of those 115,000, there's only about 40,000 that people have really heard of. It's a staggering number. We can use all of this to feed the artificial characters, to make them feel a little more convincing. ■









Did the quirky palates of the iOS audience make *Quarrel* an easier sell? "Having games on iOS has definitely started to bring about a lovely diversity of stuff," says Penn. "And it's allowed the more eclectic stuff to rise to the surface"



Quarrel's combination of Risk and Scrabble is singleplayer-only at the moment. You have troops who occupy your territories; the number of troops on a square defines the number of letters (from an initial pool of eight) that you can use in a word battle to defend your territory or invade others

RANDOM HEARTS

Why an element of luck is so important to a boardgame

Penn cites an unlikely element as being central to the success of any puzzle game: randomness. "One of the things that works well with *Quarrel* is that you don't know what anagram you're going to get," he says. "I remember reading an article years ago. It was five guys from five boardgame companies and they were asked to list the top ten factors that defined a successful boardgame, and the one that surprised me at the time was luck. They believed luck was a really important factor. I thought: 'No! It's about skill!' It turns out that it is about skill, but there's got to be a little bit of luck in there too. You don't know how good you are until you're put under duress. You show your skill by reacting to luck."

REALTIME GAMING

We play Punchdrunk's live-action take on Resistance 3

Some games are so realistic, so fully realised, that you want to get inside and touch, taste and smell them. But once we were inside theatre company Punchdrunk's ...And Darkness Descended – an interactive live-action walkthrough inspired by *Resistance 3* (see review on p100) – we wanted to get out as quickly as possible.

In a post-apocalyptic London, our mission was to get an urgent message to Joseph Capelli and his resistance fighters in the US. But we were just nine strangers in the tunnels under Waterloo station, carrying a four-digit code and three torches. Lights flickered on and off, obscuring where we were and who was with us. It smelled damp. Booming, ominous sounds surrounded us. There could have been a killer mutant in every corner of our meticulously detailed environs. We had no weapons, extra lives, map or cheats. It all lent a powerful sense that we were playing for real as the last humans in a fallen city.

Initially, a rebel fighter guided our progression, a necessary intervention. He set the pace, making us run, hide or look for key objects, and kept us pumped full of adrenaline with shouting and shoving. So much so that we sprinted off without a backwards glance when he was dragged away by growling Chimeras.

Having previously scared children witless with its live-action Dr Who adventure The Crash Of The Elysium, Punchdrunk took ...And Darkness Descended along similar traditional game-rule and architecture lines. Levels had to be 'solved' before we could progress. Crucial steps had to be followed, and getting one thing wrong would have meant getting stuck in a loop, which is frustrating in a game, but frightening to the extreme in a real-life situation with perceived physical dangers.

Punchdrunk drew on Japanese 'walks of terror' for the game, following their linear progressions through haunted houses. There were no opportunities to linger over the sets, or marvel at smells. But one minor mistake revealed its fragile setup. Asked to activate a circuit, we found a switch, but not the lever we had been briefed about. Then it became clear: it was a speaker for the sound system – we were trying to activate stage equipment. We hurried away, determined not to acknowledge such an obvious example of the game's artifice.

Eventually we won, because we played along and played well. Afterwards, we stood sweaty, triumphant and a bit shaky in the bar. *Resistance 3* was available to play, but picking up a joypad somehow didn't feel the same. ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Most people in the Bigpoint universe don't ever pay. **But if they want to, don't just offer hats** – offer them something that will help them."

Bigpoint's chief games officer **Philip Reisberger** tells us that headgear isn't the key to a free-to-play gamer's heart. His replacement? Weaponry



"We turn on the lights whenever we go to the bathroom and turn them off again when we're done. It was annoying at first, but we're all used to it now."

Toshihiro Nagoshi on Sega's efforts to reduce energy consumption by 15 per cent and thus address Tokyo's power shortage problems



"A lot of videogame movies are made by directors who don't know the videogames they are based on from a **hole in the head.**"

Paul WS Anderson, writer and producer of Resident Evil: Extinction. You know, the one partly set in a post-apocalyptic Nevada desert



"Things money can't buy: hanging out with my kids while they watch me play *Madden 12* on our PS3."

Mike Tyson's kids must really treasure those special gaming moments

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Let's Go Island 3D
Manufacturer Sega

The lightgun genre, with its dependence on depth of field, would seem a perfect fit for stereoscopic 3D, and out to prove the point is Sega's *Let's Go Island 3D*. With a cabinet tailored to two players, this on-rails run around a deadly tropical island is a family-friendly proposition.

A 52-inch display offers glasses-free 3D on a scale never before seen in arcades, and – as with Taito's *Elevator Action Death Parade* (see **E**230) – *Let's Go Island 3D* attempts to add an extra level of sensorial impact, albeit with wind effects here rather than slamming elevator doors.

It may be family friendly, but it's far from tame. There's nothing watered-down about the flurry of savage animal attacks and density of onscreen detail, although minigames offer respite from trigger-finger fatigue and lighten the tone. It's an experience best shared: co-op feels mandatory to fight off the more aggressive enemies, and a second set of eyes to spot hidden routes is handy.

Like a crossbreed of *House Of The Dead* and *Point Blank*, the game fuses chaos with humour and old-fashioned thrills with cutting-edge tech in its attempts to keep lightgun games relevant.




WorldMags


TBC


PC DVD


PS3


PlayStation Network


XBOX 360.


XBOX LIVE


BATTLEFIELD 3


BATTLEFIELD 3


BATTLEFIELD 3


Origin


DICE


EA

My favourite game
Dominic Aitchison

The Mogwai bassist talks gaming soundtracks, making time to play on tour, and his enduring respect for a well-known Hylian

One of the less likely Easter eggs in gaming history is the appearance of instrumental guitar rock band Mogwai as a team in 1999's *Actua Ice Hockey 2*. We talk to bassist **Dominic Aitchison** about his abiding passion for gaming and whether Mogwai might ever do a game soundtrack. Because they really should, you know.

As a member of an active touring band, how do you keep up with gaming?
It's quite tough. You've got a lot of downtime, so a lot of your time is spent waiting to soundcheck or waiting to play the show. A couple of years ago I bought a laptop to take on the road. I got a Steam account and started playing *Team Fortress 2*, but it was such a massive pain in the arse because with one router the whole band and crew are all trying to get on the Internet and it just never works. I spent a lot of time on my DS when it first came out and that's now transferred over to my iPad. Nothing ever really replaces sitting in front of your console, though. It's pathetic because I have a great job, but I find myself itching to get back to my console. I hate reading about all my pals on forums and what they're playing. Especially with multiplayer games – you know that even after two weeks everyone's going to know the maps and you're going to have a really tough introduction to it.

Are you interested in making the sort of dynamic music that works for games?
Yeah – it would be very different for us, but it would be really interesting. A lot of what we do involves layers and I like the thought that an action you're carrying out on the screen triggers the next loop in the music. It would be a slight challenge, but I think we could do a good job on it. But it's one of these things – it would be time-consuming and we don't really have the time. Outside of playing shows we're either recording or writing another record.

YOUNG GUNS
Mogwai's appearance in *Actua Ice Hockey 2* was as a team named Mogwai Young Team, complete with likenesses. "All other games these days seem to go for the Fatboy Slim-style, big beat, trendy sound. We're trying to get away from that," Gremlin said at the time. "We thought that with ice hockey being a violent sport a track such as Like Herod would reflect that with its distorted guitar sounds."



Do the other members of the band share your interest in games?
Not really. Some of the guys I play *Bad Company 2* with, but that's about it. They like to play *FIFA*. When we recorded the last album we had an Xbox in the studio so we sat around playing *Tiger Woods*. Any sort of pass-the-pad game goes over well. There was a good tour where we had an Xbox with us on the bus and we all sat around playing *Geometry Wars 2*. That was fantastic. They've all got PlayStations, but they're not quite as obsessive as I am.

> "It's pathetic because I have a great job, but I find myself itching to get back to my console"

What's your opinion of game music? Do you admire much of it?
I think the soundtrack is frequently the most forgettable part of a game. There are games I have liked the music from, but it's usually a lot of the downloadable titles, such as *Everyday Shooter*. It's really rough and it sounds like a four-track demo, and a lot of people really hated it, but I really liked that because it was quite different. I usually like sparser-sounding things, when games have music as ambient noise. I think that works better. I find the bombastic orchestral soundtracks that a lot of games have are so forgettable. I almost weep if I read that Hans Zimmer's collaborated on a new *Modern Warfare* soundtrack. I really like the music for *Flower*, too, because another loop or layer would kick in without any real dramatic changes and it would work really well. *The Red Dead Redemption* soundtrack was fantastic, and I was really surprised by the way the full Jose Gonzalez song came in when you went into Mexico. It was a great moment. Yeah, it's one of the few games that I've ever bought the soundtrack for. I really like the music from *Minecraft*, as well. It's fab that it only comes in occasionally; you get so used to hearing the pitter-patter of your footsteps and then a little bit of music will come in.

Here's the question, then: what's your favourite game?
Ocarina Of Time, because it was the first game that I sank months of my time into. It was my first experience of a huge world that you could explore. There was so much to discover and to enjoy. I suppose up to that point I'd been used to arcade games. I bought a 3DS and it's the only game I've got for it. I've completed that game God knows how many times, and I've bought it yet again for full price! I knew as I went up to the counter: 'This is the biggest waste of money. I've still got my N64, and I've got the version you got free with *Wind Waker*…' It's a great game. ■

Mogwai was formed in 1995 in Glasgow and released its first album, Young Team, in 1997. Yes, the band is named after the furry proto-Gremlins

Getty Images: Toni Fancois

THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A sprinkling of things that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**233

WEB SITE

Magical Game Time
magicalgametime.com
Illustrator Zac Gorman's work spans music – working with the likes of Mogwai and My Morning Jacket – comics and now, at his blog Magical Game Time, videogames. The short game-themed comic strips and sketches cast a delightful, worldly eye over some of the medium's poster-children. From Link's verdict on Goron's cooking to some wonderful character sketches, Gorman's work is infused with a passion for the games he recreates and represents. It's not all fun-poking and hero worship either; like the work of fellow illustrator Mare Odomo, Gorman manages to elicit a good deal of heartfelt sentiment from a minimal amount of page-space and dialogue, forging his own unique tone and miniature narratives from the icons of classic videogames past and present.





VIDEO

Mari0 gameplay video
stabyourself.net/mari0
It's a special moment when you realise Mari0 – Stabyourself's mash-up of *Super Mario Bros* and Valve's *Portal* – is not just an amusing feat of video gimmickry but an actual game in development for Windows, and Linux. Get a Koopa shell ricocheting between pipes then send it through a portal into some unsuspecting Goombas, or use the interdimensional link to drop them off the screen. Delightfully, the original game will remain fully intact except for the wrinkle of this new mechanic. Now you're plumbing with portals.

WEB GAME

Flee Buster
bit.ly/oX2HjT
Chevy Ray Johnston's entry into Ludum Dare 21, in which games are made in a weekend, is a literal game-changer. Satisfying the 'escape' theme mandate, *Flee Buster* initially has you outrunning a UFO in a simple game of platforming and token collecting. A few seconds into your jaunt, however, and you're dropped into the cockpit of a space shuttle outrunning a couple of nasty space… things. A few seconds more and you're tossed into the body of a vertically-scrolling frog. Flitting between these three games-in-progress is the crux of *Flee Buster*, and while initially jarring, it's not long before you're juggling all three segments with ease. The retro visuals never stray into distraction, keeping out of your way as you arrow-key towards the finish.



TABLET OVERDOSE

Sony S and P tablets
Following in the footsteps of the Xperia Play as 'PlayStation Certified' devices, Sony has annouced its first range of tablet computers. The S tablet offers a single 9.4-inch touchscreen, while the P (beow) is its dinky, dual-screen relative. Though the library of games for PlayStation Certified tech is still lacking, both tablets have access to Android app marketplaces, as well as to Sony's Music and Video Unlimited streaming services. But the apparent inability to sync up a DualShock for an authentic PlayStation experience seems an oversight. But even with DualShock support, could 15-year-old re-releases be enough to compete with iPad?



continue

Budget PSP
Finally a PSP we're not afraid to drop

Courting lore
Drinking *Skyrim* back-story like finest mead

Set building
Sometimes walls tell the best stories

Chiptunes
Nights out need 8bit soundtracks

quit

Budget PSP
And it looks it, unfortunately

3DS Slide Pad
Hardware patches: ah, so '90s

Wii online
Dragon Quest X: what could go wrong?

iOS pop-ups
Spamming your paying customers? No thanks

TWEETS

Wondering if there would be any benefit to directly casting plastic lenses onto OLED microdisplays to avoid one refractive transition.
@ID_AA_Carmack

When did 'mods' go from being add-ons for someone else's game to being budget priced standalone releases?
@tipofthesphere

Thought: how can we blame Ueda's close-minded view of young women on Japanese culture with guys like Miyazaki writing stories like Nausicaa?
@ADAMATOMIC

Anyone who refers to themselves in the third person is usually a dick. If you follow this rule it makes each and every Pokemon an asshole.
@therealcliffyb



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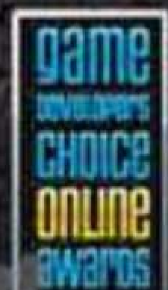
- Fast-paced competitive online game that will test both your skill and mind.
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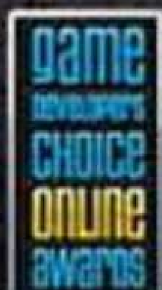
Best Online Game



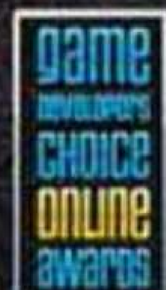
Best PC Game



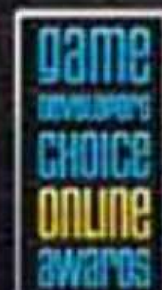
Best New Game



Best Visual Arts



Best Game Design



Audience Award



Free to Play



Best Multiplayer



Best Strategy

DISPATCHES NOVEMBER

Within Dispatches this month, Dialogue sees **Edge**'s readership expressing no interest in *Modern Warfare 3* (which might be awkward, given what starts on p78), calling out the *Resident Evil* series for not being as good as it used to be, raving about PlayStation Vita and coming up with what can only be a winning plan to repopularise arcades. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** gets inspired to go looting, **Leigh Alexander** calls her allies to her empire, and milquetoast **Brian Howe** is left whimpering after playing an updated version of a classic.



next-gen.biz
Edge on the Web, with links to all of our online activity



Issue 232

Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Judge not, lest ye be judged

I've noticed a bit of a trend in your letters section that's become a little more apparent of late, one that's beginning to irk more and more. **Edge** readers, unfortunately, seem to be more concerned about what games other people are playing than what games they themselves are playing – seemingly all for the sake of having gaming accepted amongst their peers or the wider general public. Have we really got to a point where games are less about enjoyment and more about judging our tastes against those of others or the mainstream market? That's not to say that I don't take an interest in what my friends are playing but I can't quite grasp how they should affect what I play and I certainly don't see why millions of people buying *Call Of Duty*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Halo* or any popular series should affect what I want to play.

I suppose it was going to happen sooner or later, right? After all, we all judge each other based on our tastes in music, film, fashion, literature, our hairstyles, our profession, our home decor, the brand of aftershave that we use and countless other things. I couldn't care less whether people like the same films or music that I do, neither should I care if other people's tastes are different to mine and neither will I find this to be the case with games.

I've been gaming for some 20 years now since my cousin introduced my four-year-old self to *Super Mario Land* on the Game Boy and since then, the bottom line of gaming for me has always been about fun and never anything else. When people ask me what I'm looking forward to I say *Catherine*, *DoDonPachi Resurrection*, *Serious Sam 3*, the XBLA release of *Radiant Silvergun* and the very recently announced *Persona 4* fighting game, and I'll say a polite but frank "no" when asked if I have an interest in *Modern Warfare 3*. I'm used to the blank stares now.

So please, **Edge** readers, don't concern yourselves with what others are playing, enjoy what you want to play and you'll find that gaming suddenly gets a lot more fun.
Alexander Davies

Ah, you're *that* sort of gamer. This phenomenon seems also reflective of games' increasingly social element, from leaderboard posturing to multiplayer partying. As such, expect more and more pressure. Our solution? New friends.

Vita's number one fan

Thank you for your excellent feature on the PS Vita. I have the system on preorder and, at over £200, it was either a Vita or a 3DS, and I needed some reassurance that my children will go without food for good reason!

Your article took me back to the hype surrounding the release of the original PSP in 2005 and led to a trip to the attic and a rummage through my stack of dusty old magazines (some now defunct). A little research from that pre-release period revealed significant concern over the single nub and a launch line-up focused heavily on sports and racing titles including the likes of *Ridge Racer*, *Wipeout* and *Everybody's Golf*, plus a worrying over-reliance of ports of old PS2 games. The final concern was perhaps the one that killed the PSP. A succession of ports that just seemed sadly, gloriously broken and, consequently, too few thirdparty developers were attracted to the system. On the other end of scale, poor positioning and marketing seemed to lead to a lack of innovative titles suited to its strengths. Of course we had *LocoRoco* and *Lumines*, but there simply were not enough of these.

Fast forward six years and it seems that Sony has absorbed the feedback from past failures in developing the Vita. Hopefully this will lead to a steady stream of unique software using its array of shiny tools, leading to a strong USP (and not a PSP) within the crowded forest of handhelds and phones. I also think it will enjoy the best of both worlds through releasing top-drawer titles that utilise its power and controls that will, ultimately, be judged as an equal of, and not just a port, of the home console versions.

I can happily report that, having read your article, my Vita preorder is still intact!
Nick Smith

Arcade rebirth

With sadness I read of the death of gaming arcades such as Funland and the possibility of arcades dying out altogether. I spent countless weekend hours (and indeed stolen school hours) lost in a haze of sight, sound and smoke in places such as these.

I hasten to add that I wouldn't want to ever have those hours back, because it was always such terrific fun; whether checking out the latest titles that had arrived, or seeing how long myself and friends could make coins last on older titles already mastered, or perhaps even bouncing those miniature basketballs off friends' heads as we shot some hoops playing *Nothin' But Net*. I think the closure of such places is somewhat premature, because with just a few enhancements I believe arcades could become thriving establishments once more, entertaining generations of youngsters.

The major complaint about arcades seems to be that of a lack of social interaction and personal recognition – things that these days can be readily achieved with hardware people already have access to; gadgets and applications that have the capability of raising self-esteem more effectively, in essence. I went to a seminar once where the main gist of the speaker's talk was that to become successful (or at least the way he did) was to take something already in existence that was popular and simply add something to it, therefore making it 'original', or at

least more exclusive, and I figured that this line of thinking could perhaps be applied to arcade cabinets. Say you chose *Galaga*: within seconds of starting, a mechanical arm could shoot out of its side holding a Blackberry telling you that you have six messages from friends urgently wanting to contact you and for you to call them as soon as possible; or when you reached 2,000 points another arm perhaps could shoot out from a different part of the cabinet holding a miniature LCD screen with a Facebook page on it telling you that since playing you have had 186 friends added (and a camera sitting atop the cabinet in the meantime could take a snap of you as you played and incorporate your face into the page in order for it to feel all the more authentic); a speaker to the right of the coin-slot could constantly blare out that you have won various achievements and awards – for how awesome your score is, how brilliant your dress sense is, your hair, etc.

Overall I am sure you agree that this is a flawless plan that should be implemented immediately to save any classic arcades out there that are about to close for good.

Robert Roemer

This is exactly the sort of visionary thinking for which the arcade industry has been crying out for years. May we also suggest folding some free-to-play fun into the mix? "TIME EXTEND! Yours to play right now for just 80 SegaPoints, or wait until tomorrow to play for free," perhaps. Here's a 3DS to help further inspire you.

Resident feeble?

What has happened to the *Resident Evil* series? I remember being a wannabe zombie ass-kicker child, in awe of my uncle who deemed me too young to play the games. Still I would watch, wide-eyed; the music, the monsters, the mansion, the mayhem. Now? There are chapters, there's no in-game box to store your items, the music is boring. Sheeva just gets in the way, and Chris looks as if he's been locked in a gym since 1998.

The main reason *Resident Evil* was so much fun for me was down to the dark and lonely setting, the far-fetched puzzles and playing as a character who didn't look as if they could back-flip out of a window and land unharmed (I'm talking to you *Resident Evil 5*!). However, I still had hope. I feverishly defended Capcom, blaming it on a silly phase they were going through. Maybe the next game will be set in London! Yes, dark alleys, zombie-filled Tube stations! Maybe even a zombie tiger from London Zoo! No. Set in Raccoon City AGAIN. A man who can see through walls and another who can turn himself invisible. Psh, I want whoever is responsible for the abomination of *Resident Evil* sequels of late to quit now!

Joseph Fantucchio

Say no to control mapping

Following a conversation about left and right handedness, the age-old debate about customisable controls came up. I was surprised at how many people thought it a good idea, and wanted to redress the balance.

Fully customisable control mapping? No way, bad idea. Developers decide how you interact with their vision. If a dev wants to let you change things around, then fine. The fighting game is a good example of full re-mapping working, but elsewhere it can encourage game-breaking behaviour, either through busting immersion or allowing exploits.

We blame the developer for buggy missions, never the player for doing it in the wrong order

We can quite rightly berate developers for implementing clunky or unwieldy controls, and along with other gameplay factors let that inform your buying decision. But giving the user the freedom to do the wrong thing is just as bad as doing it themselves. We blame the developer for buggy missions, never the player for doing things in the wrong order.

If we expect developers to predict what the player will do and accommodate even the strangest actions and motivations, then we can't remove one of the biggest tools they have. Pads are the directest communication between developer and player; don't let the player dictate that conversation.

C Beard

We're all for developer power, but part of that conversation has to be accessibility, so controls support all types of player. ■



Is Sheeva symptomatic of what's wrong with recent *Resi* games? Let us know your thoughts

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to the topics we invite you to discuss on our Web site at next-gen.biz and our Facebook page.

Is violence too often used as a crutch in game design?

Its like the 'sex' issue: if it's taken seriously it can be awesome, but if it's cheap or forced or the basic concept of the marketing of the game, it's horrible, creates a bad image of the medium and can alienate potentially serious people from experiencing videogames as an experience and not just a toy.
Renato Lopes, via Facebook

Just played *Alan Wake*. It was good, but a piece of me died when I realised it was just a lot of drain the bad guys, shoot the bad guys. All this money, imagination, talent, technology and scope and yet every game is just shoot this, kill that. Perhaps at 40 I've become jaded, but I remember saying it at 30. The business needs to grow some balls and grow up. At the moment it's mainly balls covered in bum fluff.
Alan Mitchell, via Facebook

Did I really just say balls covered in bum fluff? I hang my head in shame.
Alan Mitchell, via Facebook

Given the 'violence is a human necessity' theory, gaming offers the only playground for the average man/woman. I'm not defending gratuitous violence like in a *MW2* airport way or plain bad-guys gunning down, but having the chance to frag some other players is certainly a joy. Is it distasteful? It can be argued. But is it natural? It certainly is.
João Veríssimo, via Facebook



marshdavies.com



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

In case of a zombie apocalypse, play GTA, loot yourself a DVD player and blame videogames

One thing nearly everyone agreed on about the British riots of August, from sheen-jowled dead-eyed marionette David Cameron downwards, was that they were 'mindless'. That would have come as news to the people carefully targeting branches of Game, while not, as far as I know, hurrying to loot shops that sold wool or buttons. The riots were perfectly mindful; just in a depressing way. There was nothing countercultural about them; instead, people broke into shops and nicked smartphones. Far from being anticapitalist, like the G20 protests of 2009, the riots demonstrated the enduring victory of advertising and consumerism. The desires the rioters expressed were just those desires implanted and conditioned by the commercial system. They were on the wrong side of the law, but in their thieving (and subsequent eBay fencing), they were acting as good little entrepreneurs should.

To call people 'mindless' is to dehumanise them: to turn them into animals – or, of course, zombies. And this is where I believe we can wholeheartedly blame videogames for the riots. Not in the simplistic way the media toyed with doing, as for instance when the London Evening Standard shrieked: 'CHILDREN AS YOUNG AS TEN, INSPIRED BY VIDEO GAME, AMONG THE LOOTERS'. A policeman 'quoted' by the Daily Mirror, meanwhile, was alleged to have muttered: "When I was young it was all *Pac-Man* and board games. Now they're playing *Grand Theft Auto* and want to live it for themselves." Ah yes, *Grand Theft Auto*: a game that no self-respecting teen has likely been playing for years. The possibly made-up policeman, moreover, had obviously not realised that *Pac-Man* is itself an incitement to looting, as you race around the maze (of shop aisles) eating dots (lifting CDs) while avoiding the ghosts (coppers), and then turning the tables by attacking the ghosts (coppers) once you have eaten an energy pill (prepared your Molotov cocktail for throwing).

No, videogames were to blame for the riots in a more subtle and insidious way. Take the case of the 31-year-old schoolteacher who pled guilty in Croydon magistrate's court to looting from Richer Sounds. This is a person who is not only supposed to set a good example to children, by virtue of being a professional adult, but actually educates children himself. What could possibly have been going through his mind when he committed his crime? What could have overridden any innate sense of ethics, or at least reasonable fear that being caught might destroy his life as he knew it? I'll tell you what he must have been thinking: 'Oh, the zombie apocalypse has started! Nothing will ever be the same again now. Might as well loot a DVD player so I can lock myself in watching movies until the undead hordes come for me'.

And that is why videogames are to blame. They have conditioned us, over the years, to assume that as soon as anything that looks like it might be a zombie apocalypse kicks off, that is the end of life as we know it, for ever. How many zombie games do you know of that end with the defeat or cure of the shambling rotters and a return to civilised suburban life? But that, in reality, is what happens, even after the worst depredations wrought by history's worst people. (The handwritten notice on a Manchester shop door, blaming its early closing on 'the imminent collapse of society', was a nicely ironic acknowledgment of this.)

Videogames represent many things well (aliens collapsing in showers of gore), and other things hardly at all (the resilience of social systems). This is what games are teaching our kids: that anarchic chaos is never-ending. Amusingly, many of the looters stole videogames that were going to teach them the same thing all over again, if they ever got the chance to play them before going to prison.

> The special mindlessness of the complacent, middle-class media is a thing to be treasured

Writing about the riots quickly became its own kind of massively multiplayer 'interactive fiction' event, with journalists swapping nano-ideas on Twitter before proudly linking to their columns in which they vied to blame the ConDem budget cuts, or (in the case of the satirical personage known as 'Melanie Phillips') 'political correctness', or to denounce the process of blaming anything at all, et cetera. A lot of this was no less 'mindless' than its subject allegedly was, but the special mindlessness of the complacent, middle-class media is a thing to be treasured, unlike its supposed counterpart in the hooded 'underclass'.

The night before composing the analytical shoebomb you are reading, I played *Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon*, and its allegory of modern social anxieties was disturbingly obvious: the giant insects represented immigrants and looters ('ravagers', indeed), while my turrets and lasers were barely disguised water cannon and rubber bullets, of the kind the e-petitioning members of our population so devoutly wish should be turned on their fellow citizens. Sadly, I was unable to finish the game before this month's deadline, so I am unable to report on whether everything goes back to normal at the end.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net







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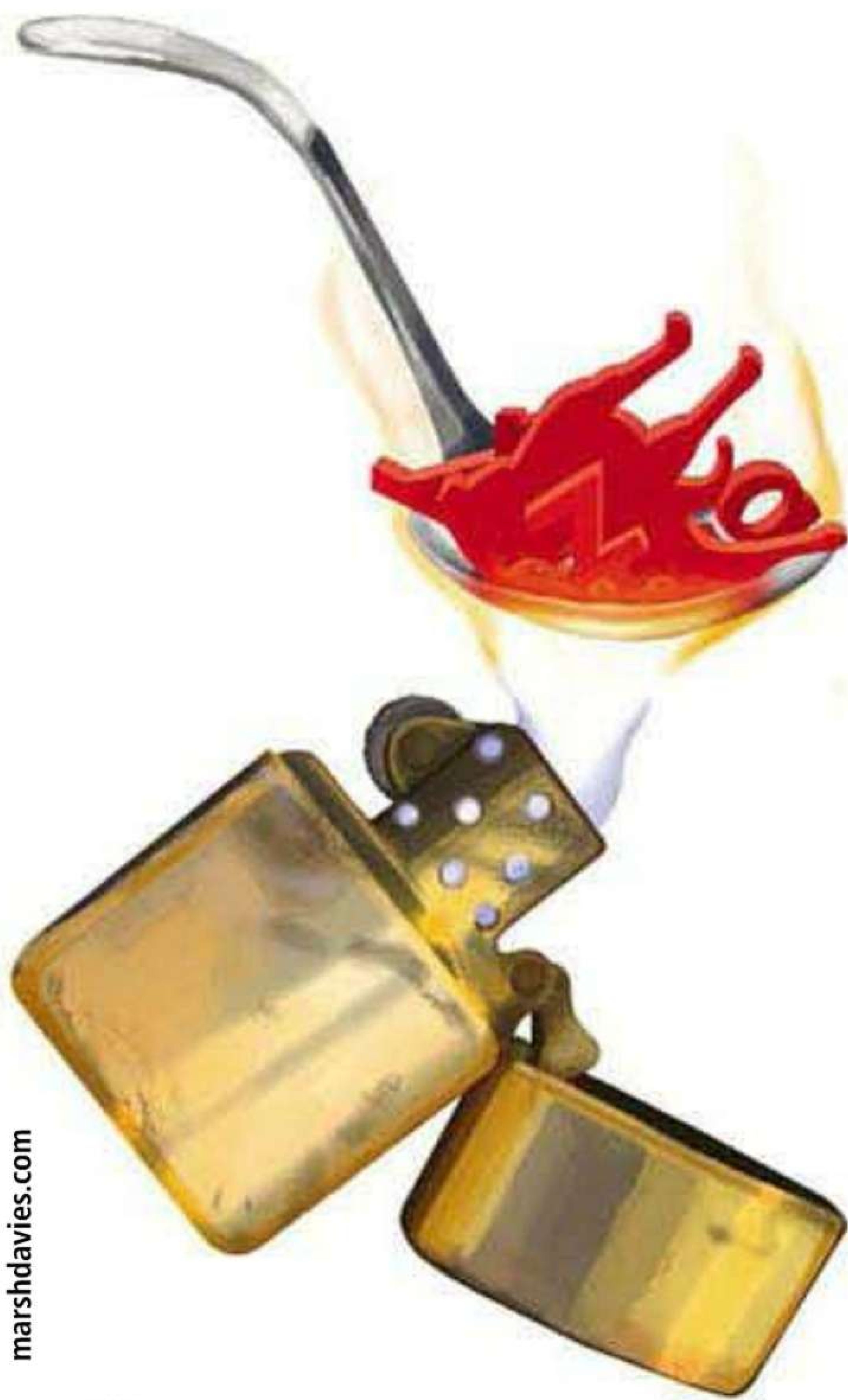
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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Why the social gaming sector exemplified by Empires & Allies is an industry driven by hits

I can't stop playing Zynga's *Empires & Allies* on Facebook, despite the industry's derision. Everyone made fun of PopCap for hooking soccer moms with widely copied match-three puzzlers, and we snickered at Nintendo's absurdly titled Wii, wondering who in the world was going to buy such a thing. And when it comes to social games, the disdain is similarly virulent – even though, just like PopCap and Wii, it's having the last laugh in the numbers game. But unlike PopCap and Nintendo, Zynga hasn't earned a shred of respect for changing the game industry.

Often, traditional gamers and creators are used to feeling misunderstood, so they diminish or reject anything that threatens to simplify their pastime or to share it with general audiences. But when it comes to Zynga games – or wider 'social game design' on Facebook, led by Zynga – I'm pretty sure they deserve every last share of criticism they get.

If videogames are like flowers, mysterious, lovely and pleasurable things, Zynga has discovered the precise thing you need to do to poppies to derive heroin. That analogy may be extreme, but the critical user acquisition and maintenance arc for social games to be successful is quite a lot like the methodology of junk pushers. Let's take my experience with *Empires & Allies*, shall we?

I've largely avoided games in the *-Ville* family. But then, a few friends sent me *Empires & Allies* invites – people whose judgement I trust, even. In the end, the opportunity to have industry financial analyst Michael Pachter installed in my fictional government building as Secretary of the Treasury was too much of a lark to ignore, and I joined up.

Immediately, I was inundated with a sea of objectives, a feedback flood. Shapes and spangles pop up everywhere, and a progress bar praises you for every little thing, more breathless and hyperbolic with every coin and star and heart you click (AMAZING! EXCELLENT!). Click enough things, and you earn yourself more things. Very quickly, the game trains you to feel rewarded when you string together clicks into larger goals. That's how drug gangs work, too – recruiting older kids to 'set the example' for younger ones, or using trendy places for distribution. You're more likely to try something if your cool friends do it.

> Every second I resented myself. I could feel how my curiosity had long given way to compulsion

Access is friendly and instantaneous. It promises you don't need to spend money to have fun. Maybe all those people who told you how stupid and evil these games are were wrong. You start off with a plenitude of resources, and more seems to come easily; anything you want that you can't get, you can acquire by spending Empire Points.

The tasks pile up. Completing them feels good. Part of you knows you're just mindlessly clicking; part of you figures you'll just build one more house, which means you have to raise just a hundred more coins, which means you should sow two more plots.

Then, suddenly, your plenitude runs dry. You learn that you've spent all your 'energy' – loosely translatable as time. If you want to finish all of your objectives, you buy more, or you buy shortcuts. With Empire Points, which you spent before you even realised they were worth money. It's sneaky like that. The average player has no idea what the difference is between the different kinds of currency at the top of the screen, and that the one that buys the really good stuff can't be earned by play. Until it's gone, and it's time to pony up.

The cycle of initial plenitude is also part of the drug dealer's strategy. Make the user feel great, then yank it away. Ask them for just a little bit more than they'd planned to invest, and chances are they'll pay, even while they still think they're in control.

The rationalisation – part of any addiction cycle – starts. It's just pocket change, and you're having fun, so it seems worth it. You've spent a lot more money on other games you don't spend as much time playing with. Five dollars seems a minor price for a few hours of fun – it's cheaper than one drink at the bar, cheaper than a movie ticket! Before you know it, you've put $15 into *Empires & Allies*.

Erm. I put $15 into it, across three transactions, and every second I resented myself. I could feel how my initial curiosity had long given way to compulsion, my intelligence was being insulted, and still I was paying.

The worst part is that these 'social' games mimic the social ecosystem around drugs. To avoid bugging friends, you stick to playing with those you know are also users. Suddenly people you've never really networked with become necessary allies, to be contacted daily. In extreme situations, your engagement priorities shift toward those who are part of the game with you. You band together to coax others in, because you need company, any company, for your ecosystem. You are a codependent, doing what you swore you wouldn't.

When the game asks you to invite more friends in order to finish this or that, you scan your friends list wondering who's most vulnerable, who's least likely to mind. You're a user now, too. You're complicit in the machine. It's not social; it's not a game. It's just gross. It really is.

I mean, add me on Facebook! Let's play it!

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media





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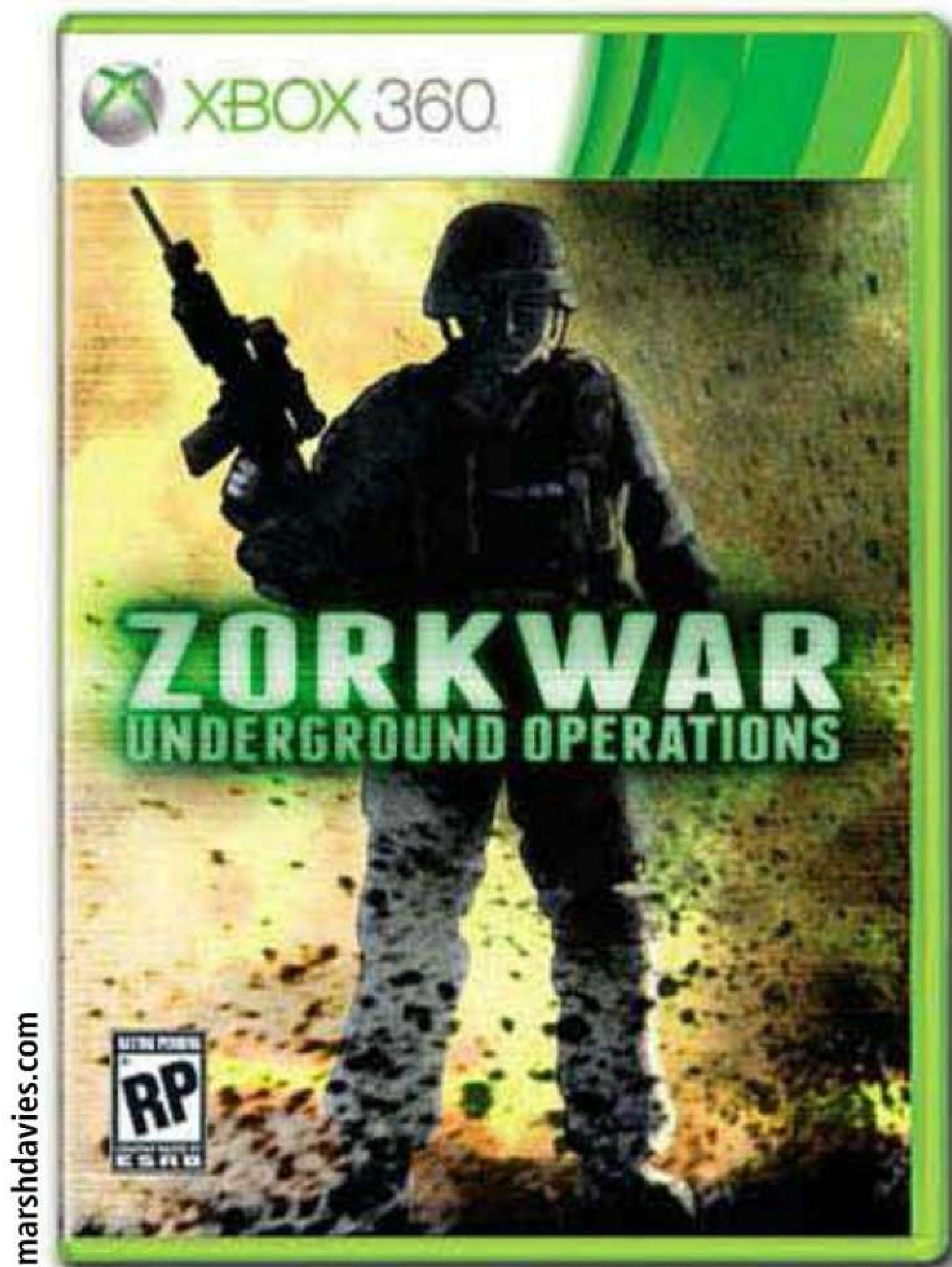
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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

What if Infocom's classic text-based adventure Zork had been released for Christmas 2011?

Outside of Heavily Armed Compound. You are standing in a smouldering field of wreckage before a heavily armed compound. To the east, south, north, and west, invisible walls have sprung up. A tree with low branches stands nearby. There is a leaflet resting on the ground.

›read leaflet

"Welcome to *ZORKWAR*, a text-based secondperson adventure game of running, hiding, shooting, and further running."

›climb tree

In the tree you find several guns encrusted with precious gems, apparently hoarded by a psychopathic bluebird.

›take loadout

Strapped.

›enter compound

Heavily Armed Compound.

You are in a warehouse with crates and barrels strewn about. Suddenly, you hear aggressive techno music and heavily armed mutants come swarming out of the air ducts. Bullets and acid bombs thud into your chest.

›shoot mutants

What do you want to shoot the mutants with?

›for god's sake, shoot mutants with GUN

Well, why didn't you say so? But you are too late. You slump to the ground, your heartbeat fading in your ears as your vision goes red and runny. The next thing you know, you are standing in a smouldering field of wreckage before a heavily armed compound.

›enter compound

Heavily Armed Compound.

You are in a warehouse with crates and barrels strewn about. Suddenly, you hear aggressive techno music and heavily armed mutants come swarming out of the air ducts. Bullets and acid bombs thud into your chest.

›hide behind barrel

Now you're on the right track! Unfortunately, this is an exploding barrel. You have exploded. Would you like to switch to Pansy Mode? Would you, pansy?

›yes

Moderately Armed Compound.

You are in a warehouse with crates and barrels strewn about. There are dainty lace doilies on them. Suddenly, you hear chipper J-pop music and moderately armed mutants come swarming out of the air ducts. Bullets thud into your chest, but it doesn't hurt that bad. Pansy.

›hide behind crate until they stop shooting

Ah, the penny drops at last.

›stand up and shoot at mutants with gun

You spew hot lead until your gun clicks empty.

›crouch down and reload gun

What do you want to reload the gun with?

›with fruitcake, genius

Reloaded.

›what? no! that was sarcasm

Your fruitcake ammo pelts harmlessly off of thick carapaces. By the way, that sarcastic face of yours? Mostly hanging off your skull at this point.

›crouch down and reload gun with bullets

That's better.

›Stand up and shoot at mutants with gun

Yep.

›crouch down and reload gun with bullets

Perfect!

›so this is basically it huh?

Your health meter's still dropping…

›Stand up and shoot mutants with gun

The last mutant falls to the ground and melts away. You dress your grievous wounds and espy a large, flashing arrow pointing towards a door, which springs open.

›enter door

You are in a maze of twisty brown passages.

›north

You are in a maze of twisty brown passages.

›west

You are in a maze of twisty brown passages.

›south

Mutants suddenly swarm into the twisty brown passages, raising 11 kinds of hell. Blast, bloom, and maim effects fill up your field of vision, obscuring the miles of brown pattern stretching away in every direction. More mutants are repelling down the walls! And oh my god they have tactical nukes.

> Blast, bloom, and maim effects fill up your vision, obscuring the miles of brown in every direction

›run and shoot in a blind panic

You run and shoot wildly. So much crap is blowing up right now, I really don't even know how to describe it. Blundering through the fiery chaos you run into a knee-high barricade blocking a mutant-free corridor.

›jump over barricade

I don't understand the word "barricade."

›YOU JUST SAID IT

I say a lot of things.

›hmm... roll

What do you want to roll up?

›what have you got? HEY-OH

As you dither about with dumb jokes, a grue gnaws on your collarbone. You're trapped, out of ammo and at death's door.

›plugh

A hollow voice says: "Fool."

You are standing in a smouldering field of wreckage before a moderately armed compound. Pansy Mode might be too tough for you. Would you like to switch to Milquetoast Mode?

›RAGE QUIT

Brian Howe writes about music, books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Paste

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Power struggle

The faces of the human – and in the case of the orcs and cat-people, less human – inhabitants of *Skyrim* (p46) look pretty good. Not *LA Noire* good, admittedly, but there's a generational leap between these detailed mugs and the pudgy visages of *Oblivion*. Except, of course, there isn't. *Skyrim* might be running on a radically uprated game engine, but many players will be experiencing it using the same hardware they used for the previous *Elder Scrolls* game (although possibly not the very same unit, if you're a 360 owner).

With this in mind, the leap in detail is astonishing. However, it's worth noting the extent to which Bethesda attributes *Skyrim*'s more beautiful brand of high fantasy to a decreased reliance on procedural generation of assets – greater reliance, in other words, on old-fashioned artistry. The visual gulf between this *Elder Scrolls* and the previous instalment, then, is a tribute to both creativity and technical ingenuity.

Of course, there are limits to what this generation of hardware can do. *Battlefield 3* (p62) may look astonishing in trailers, but you can rest assured that it's been looking astonishing on PC. More importantly, while the PC version sees 64 players fighting for territory across some of the largest multiplayer maps the series has seen, console warriors will have to make do with 24 players fighting in appropriately scaled-down arenas. With the sheer size of the multiplayer map we played being a major part of the game's appeal, it's hard not to see the console versions as compromised in at least this one respect.

It's not unusual for a game to look its best on PC, but *Battlefield 3* is a crossplatform release whose most significant differences on console can be measured in terms of size and scale, not the resolution of its textures. As the gap between console and PC hardware continues to widen, it won't be the last title that opts to make such trade-offs.

MOST WANTED

Trials Evolution 360
RedLynx's quest to perfect the art of motocross masochism stands to benefit hugely from the addition of local and online multiplayer. Instead of being confined to leaderboard tussling, it will be immensely gratifying to see our rear tyre kick dirt into our rival's fat ugly face.

Virtua Fighter 5: Final Showdown 360, PS3
This overhaul of Sega's standard-setting beat 'em up has the feature-list of a sequel rather than an expansion. New modes, characters, stages and crucial tweaks to fighter balancing make this one to watch (and yearn for) as its summer 2012 window approaches.

Little King's Story 2 Vita
Marvelous Entertainment's unsung classic gets a handheld sequel. The variety of the original, from eyeing the lie of the land under a starry night to doing battle with local rivals, should give the developer more than enough ways to exploit Vita's numerous features.


HYPE

THE ELDER SCROLLS V:
SKYRIM

We head to the mountains to go hands-on with Bethesda's open-world epic

Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Developer In-house
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin US
Release November 11

Slaying a dragon and absorbing its soul rewards you with the ability to use Shouts, a powerful form of magic. There will be 20 in the game, and their effects range from granting the player a faster running speed to summoning a dragon to help in combat





THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM



BELOW **Though not every critter you find roaming Skyrim wishes you ill, it is home to plenty of unforgiving creatures: hulking ice golems and serpentine ice wraiths will not thank you for invading their territory**





One slew a dragon and used newfound powers to telekinetically ruin a banquet. Another slunk into a forbidden fort and ignited a small war between the guards of two neighbouring factions. The third plunged into the disused mines along Skyrim's border and ended up farming gourds on the grassy windswept steppe of Whiterun. Of those players sat at consoles next to us, no two describe a similar experience; it's easy to see why Bethesda's open-world RPG series absorbs as many days and nights as you can afford to throw at it. It's also why three-and-a-bit hours with the game is not nearly enough to describe an experience which may well accommodate several hundred more, going by the timestamps on our previous *Elder Scrolls* saves.

We're let loose some 45 minutes into the game to preserve the details of its opening narrative for launch day. It's at this point that the icy northern lands of Skyrim open up, spilling the player into a world of possibility, populated by stories great and small, some scripted, some dynamic, some simply emerging from the chaotic confluence of the game's many AI ecosystems. We are forbidden from writing about the main quest line, but can tell you that dragons have awoken and the kingdoms of the north are divided by great political strife.

Before taking our first step, however, we kick the tyres of the character creation tools. There are humans of four flavours and three distinct shades of elf, along with orcs, the cat-like khajiit and the reptilian argonians. As is now standard, there's a multitude of sliders for sorting through preset nose tips or adjusting the depth of eye sockets, but for the first time in a Bethesda RPG, the faces no longer have a potato-headed horror about them. The non-human races are particularly striking – now more distinctly alien than simply uncanny.

"The main difference in *Oblivion* was that everyone was based off the same head and then pushed and pulled into their different races," lead artist **Matt Carofano** explains. "We've completely gotten rid of that. Each race has its unique racial face, each is very custom." (See Design Showcase, p51.) And none of it is procedural: though you can fine tune with sliders, the limits of each have been carefully defined by artists.

"Procedural generation was a big thing in 2004 and 2005," game director **Todd Howard** says. "As our tools got better we actually backed off that in certain areas and added it to others. So now, none of the landscape is procedural – it's all created by our artists.

In combat, you now have many more resources at your disposal thanks to the addition of dual-wielding, allowing you to cast spells while swinging your weapon



Crafted and enchanted

Nearly every item in the world can be built from scratch. Using the local town's smithy as an interface you can cobble together swords and armour, or upgrade the ones in your possession, although it's a slightly laborious process since you have to physically walk between furnace, iron, workbench and tanning rack in order to access the different menus. Meanwhile, wholesome meals can be cooked up at fires, giving more powerful buffs over time than the individual ingredients. Most useful of all is that enchantments can now be plucked from weapons (which then break), and reapplied to others.



LEFT **These are Skyrim's local race of humans. Tall, fair-haired and Scandinavian-looking, they make excellent warriors and seafarers**

None of the faces are procedural. But we have added back in from *Daggerfall* the idea of procedural quests, or elements which are procedural." We can certainly see the artist's hand in the environment as we step from a cave and on to the mountainside, snow-capped crags above and pine-flanked streams below. The vista is one of natural beauty extruded to the limits of credibility, and it is not the fortuitous creation of an algorithm, but a landscape crafted to be seen and, importantly, played.

"We changed how the world is created," says Carofano, "how you flow between different landscape regions, how varied the world should look, really accentuating the differences, so you feel rewarded when you find a new location. We wanted to add mountains to block the player and control the gameplay experience a little more."

The natural flow of the environment pulls you north-east from the starting area, wandering beneath the shadow of a vast mountain to the small hamlet of Riverwood. Or it would do if we weren't roleplaying a character with no sense of direction at all. So we stumble off to the west, following the banks of a river. We soon encounter other travellers – a pair of robe-clad mages who claim to be Vigilants of Stendarr, a sect devoted to the banishment of demonic worship. They're not *that* vigilant, though: just 30 metres down the road a novice conjurer is attempting some dark devilry on a skeleton laid among some standing stones. He is displeased by our intrusion, conjuring a ghost-cat which snarls and swipes at us.

We equip a shield in our left hand and an axe in our right, dodging around the stones to bury our blade in the necromancer directly. It takes only a few swipes – single taps deliver quick blows while holding the trigger unleashes a power attack – but combat clearly delivers a terrific sense of contact. Later, armed and armoured foes show off pin-point collision. Blades rebound off shields and weapon shafts with a suitably metallic resonance, while barging enemies with your own buckler breaks defensive stances in





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Screenshot gallery



kinetic fashion, sending them staggering back with a solid wooden *whomp*. Magic may offer fireworks, but simply hitting things in *Skyrim* makes you feel mighty.

Eventually we reach Falkreath, a gloomy township of weathered, mossy stonework, sunk beneath the drizzle that pours over Skyrim's southern mountain range. It's not a large place – not even big enough to merit its own loading screen – but it is nonetheless a place of some political power. It has its own jarl (the local term for king), but he seems more interested in mead and money than he does the dragon-related tumult that is otherwise enveloping the realm. Jarl Siddgeir is a recent appointment, having muscled out the previous ruler in a bit of nefarious politicking sponsored by the Imperial Guard. He's an entitled and boorish character, and won't speak to us until we've delivered him some booze, so we head along to the local inn, where we discover the old jarl, Dengeir, has retreated to pursue a career as a bitter, paranoid drunk. He is no more charming

"Players realise, by level five or six, that the perks are where the power really lies"

an individual than Siddgeir, asking us to break into the house of the local tanner and search for signs of betrayal. There's clearly more to the power-play here in Falkreath than is immediately evident, the potential conspiracy against Dengeir reflecting larger tensions across Skyrim between imperialist and secessionist factions.

Our part in it is, however, relatively simple – setting off at Siddgeir's behest to eradicate some local bandits who haven't been paying him his cut. It's a short trek to their encampment on Knifepoint Ridge, but it takes longer thanks to a hearty kicking by a tree-beast called a spriggan, which sucks the life from us at range. Having been turned to compost once, we reload and try a different route, hugging the rockface of the mountains. A burning wagon signposts bandit activity, yet we somehow miss the obvious trail, ending up on entirely the wrong side of Knifepoint Ridge, and bunny-hopping up a large plane of rock texture until we reach the plateau. Such is our grace and subtlety that bandits pour instantly from the small wooden fortress there, and we expend what stamina we have left in our first few blows against multiple opponents, before switching our axe for a fire spell. With our shield we block incoming attacks, and barge enemies to stagger them, backing away out of range while our right hand spews a torrent of flame. This proves an effective tactic, and we plug the remaining sentries with our bow, before heading into Knifepoint Mine.

After a thorough pummelling, the bandit leader stumbles and falls to all fours, attempting to crawl away – one of many custom animations that bring variety to combat encounters. Being on fire, however, he doesn't manage to crawl far, and we quickly dust the ash from his two-handed warhammer and test it on the bandits who have respawned outside. It makes short work of them: sweeping blows smash enemies about, and once their stance is broken it's easy to heave a power attack into an exposed spine or skull.

It's made all the more deadly when we level up, a process more intuitive and rewarding than before. Now you choose to boost one of three stats per level gained – stamina, health or magicka – and the effect trickles down into your skills. Each skill is represented by a constellation of perks, which you can then unlock: instead of levels conceding a change in some unseen spreadsheet, the perks commute tangible, awesome advancement. One perk unlocks the ability to sprint with shield raised, ploughing enemies aside. Another increases the power of a stealth dagger attack by so many multiples of its normal damage that you can effectively turn the game into *Splinter Cell*, sneaking among the shadows to slit throats in a single interaction.

"Pickpocketing's another one," Howard says. "At the highest level, you can pickpocket even the stuff people are wearing. There's another where you can decapitate people. It's not super-gory, but it's a surprise when you get it and heads start flying off."

There are some 200 possible perks in the game, but very few players will even make it

Q&A
Todd Howard
Game director, Bethesda Softworks



By making the Shouts part of the main quest, has pursuing magic itself become less important?
There's some overlap with magic, but by and large we tried to make that not be the case. The Shouts are things you can't do with magic, whether that's slowing down time or running really fast. The damage stuff, you can do that with anything, whether it's bows, magic, swords – it's just coming from a different resource pool and has a slightly different flavour. But things like calling in storms, or the Shout where you can encase guys in ice and they fall over – things like that are particular to Shout magic.

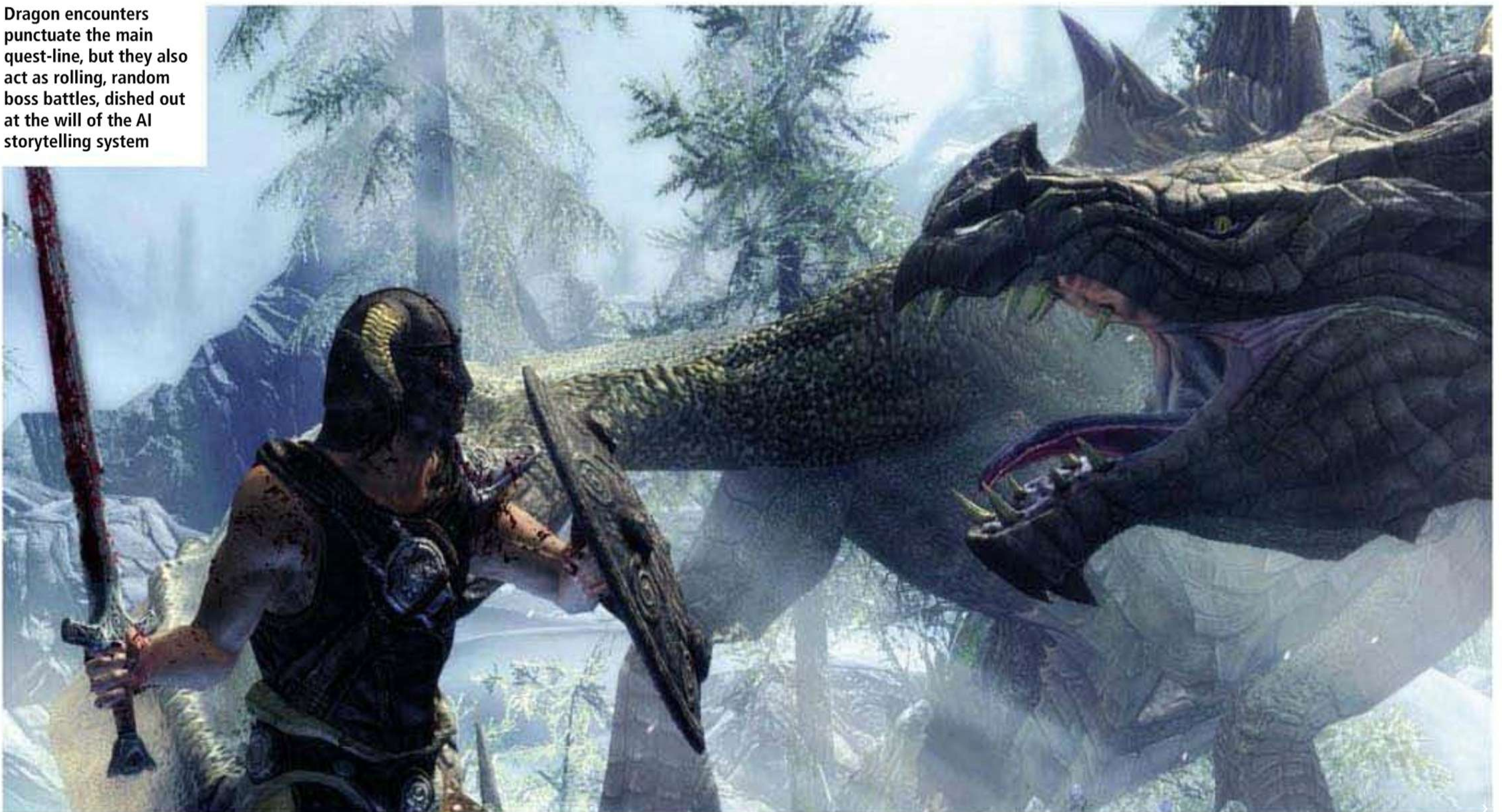
We've seen some emergent calamity by committing crimes in front of guards from one faction and then luring them into attacking us in front of guards of another faction. Do they track your behaviour independently?
There's a lot of independence between factions. We track how every person and faction feels about you, and their own limit for how many illegal things they will do. You can get followers and command them, and they may like you enough that no matter who's attacking you they will join in, even if it's the guards. But if you make friends with the jarl, the guards may like you more. We ask: are you a wanted criminal for this hold [Skyrim's equivalent of a county]? Then we do it at a faction level, and then at a personal level. So we have no number that says you are a good guy or a bad guy. It's who you made happy or angry.

The story manager is looking at everything you do and then making things happen. So if you set a chicken on fire, or you drop an item, or pickpocket somebody, or if you kill a dragon in town and absorb its soul, how people react all goes through the story manager.

Did you have to rein yourself in to get it on 360? Will it look much better on PC?
We are very comfortable on 360. Yes, it will look better on PC. The PC has moved on a lot. With the kind of things we do where we are streaming a lot, even your average hard drive on your average PC these days is crazy fast at ripping data. The negative on PC is that there are still a lot of layers of API before you can look at the hardware. So we might be able to get the data faster on PC, but what we do with that data is still easier on 360 and PS3 where we can look directly at the memory registers and do what we want. This is our third go around on these systems, so we are a lot more comfortable than we used to be.

Dunmer, *The Elder Scrolls*' dark elves, are present in Skyrim. Balanced characters, they use swords, bows and destructive magic, all the while maintaining an aloof superiority to other races

Dragon encounters punctuate the main quest-line, but they also act as rolling, random boss battles, dished out at the will of the AI storytelling system





into the 70s (though the player is inherently more versatile than before, thanks to the acquisition of magical abilities known as Shouts in the central quest). The perks encourage extremely individualised play.

"In the beginning, players dabble," says Howard. "But then they either find something that they like mechanically, or randomly they'll find an item – like a really good bow – and then they start using that. After a period of time, we notice people focus on the kind of character they want to play, because they realise, by level five or six, that the perks are where the power really lies."

Emergence does have its downsides: it's rained continuously during our playthrough, and Falkreath's mossy gloom is beginning to get to us. We decide to seek our fortune instead in Whiterun, one of the larger cities of Skyrim that's heavily inspired by the depiction of Edoras from the Lord Of The Rings films. We approach from the south, emerging from a light forest to look down upon a vast grassy plain. At its centre Whiterun rises, a series of concentric walls peaked by a grand-looking longhouse.

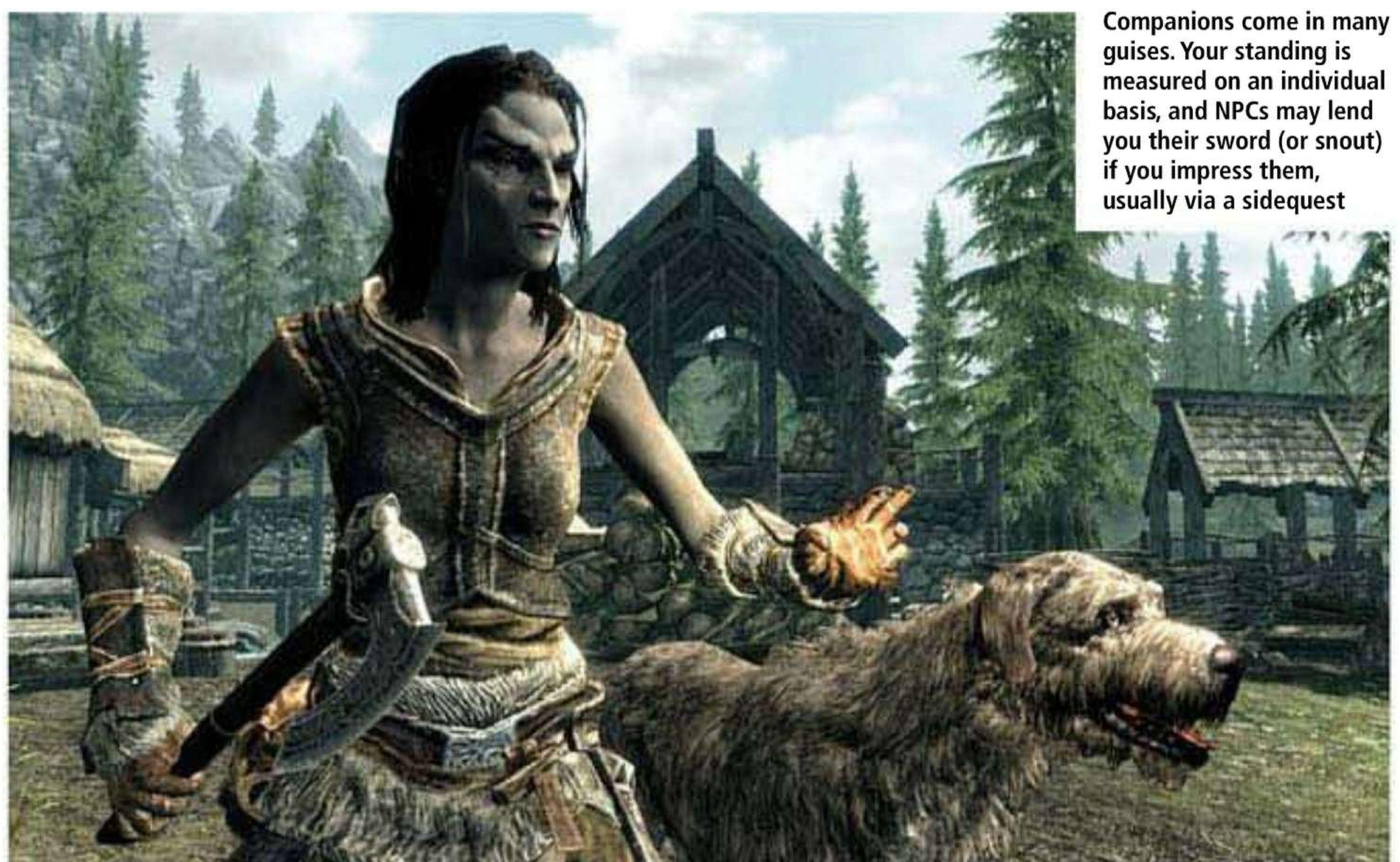
Making our way there we spot a group in battle with a giant, but with the rather indiscriminate flame spell currently equipped, we think better of attempting to intervene. The giant succumbs quickly, but the leader of the remaining warriors nonetheless gives us an earful for our reticence. It seems Aela The Huntress is a member of the Companions, *Skyrim*'s equivalent of the Fighters Guild. While guilds were available in every city in *Oblivion*, they are now rooted in specific locations. Whiterun is home to the Companions, the College of Winterhold houses mages, while the thieves lurk in the sewers beneath Riften – and each is a more distinctive organisation than before. Beardy Kodlak Whitemane inducts us, bouncing us around on some trivial fetch-quests to establish some of Whiteruns's key characters, before we finally see some action.

Bandits are on the menu again – a group of ne'er-do-wells who have occupied Valtheim Keep to the northeast. We scurry from the city and bolt across the plain towards the crags at its perimeter. A river carves a giant 'V' between two precipitous faces of pale rock and tufty grass, and high above the waters a thin stone bridge reaches out from the farthest cliff to join a tower on the nearside bank. We make our way up the spiral staircase and step out onto a walkway which is no wider than a man. The bandits can do little but attack in single file, and the battle is easily but dramatically won.

And with that, our playthrough comes to an abrupt end. These few hours tell us that many of *The Elder Scrolls*' staple pleasures have evolved for the better. Levelling now has real impetus through the juicy reward of perks; melee combat has become more potent and tactical; the world feels more alive and dramatic, thanks to its careful craft and the AI ecology which populates it. But step off the main quest-line's more cautious, more spectacular scripting, and it's clear that this is also a game of systems whose emergence does not always cohere with the narrative's tone. Skyrim is still a place where characters talk over each other in a babble of contradictory barks; it's a place in which mounting a horse you stole hours before prompts lethal fury in people you've never previously met; it's a place where allies, once gouged by a giant swinging axe-trap, might mutter suspiciously, "Hmm – this looks like trouble." It's still a place, then, where the uncanny often prevails – and yet it's that entertaining breakdown between mechanism and fiction which remains such a curiosity and a delight. Without occasionally stepping over that threshold into chaos, *Skyrim* wouldn't bring us a world as surprising and enthralling. It's why no other game this year promises as much – and why a few hours in its world really feels like no time at all. ■



Wildlife wanders throughout the game. Wolves hunt deer, going as far as to plunge into streams to catch their prey. Pelts, such as that of a bear, can be used in the crafting process



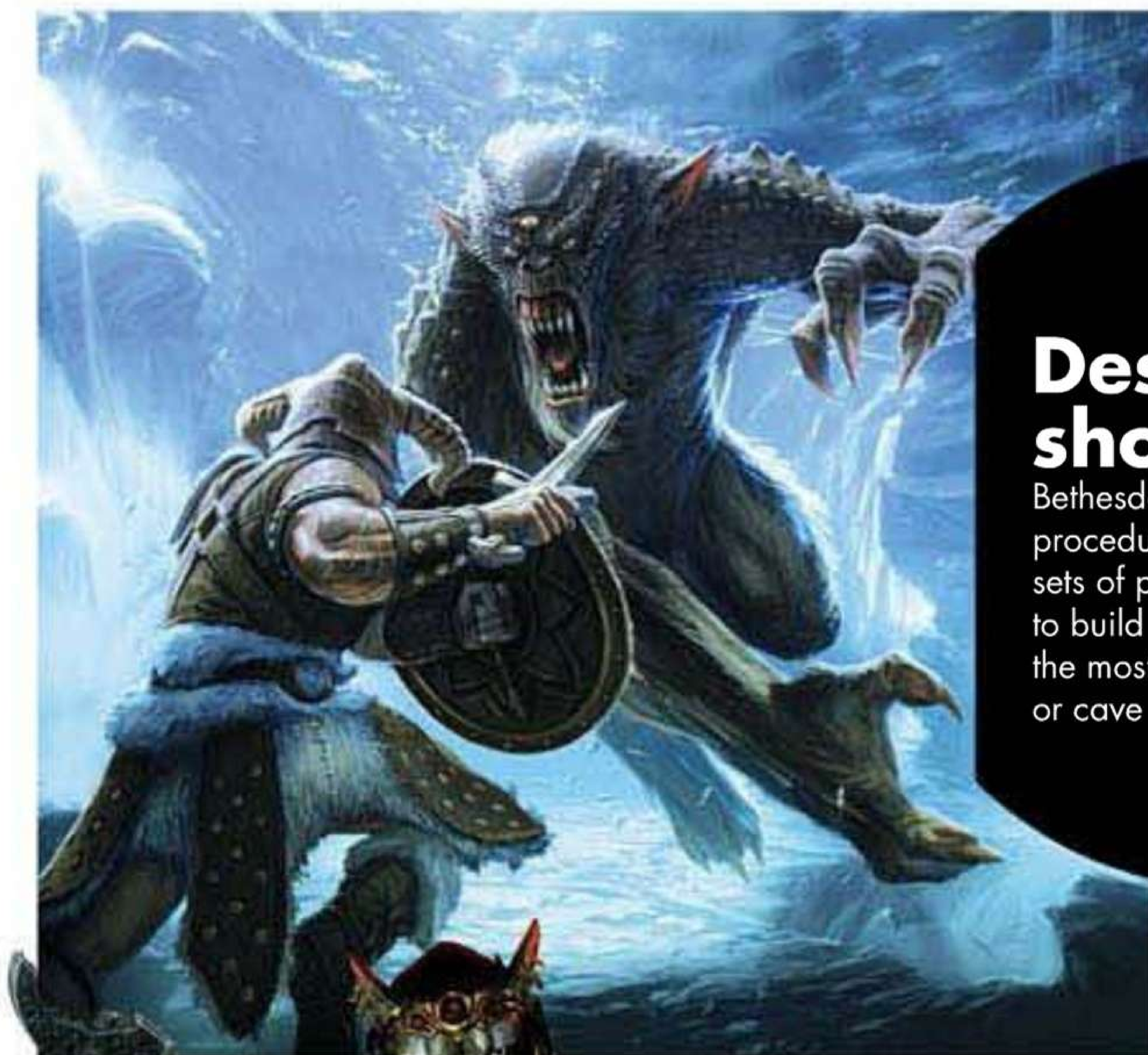
Companions come in many guises. Your standing is measured on an individual basis, and NPCs may lend you their sword (or snout) if you impress them, usually via a sidequest



LEFT **Even the non-human races, like the argonians, are easier to individualise through the character creator than in *Oblivion*. We haven't yet encountered any argonians, however, so we aren't able to say if the voice acting has been lent similar variance.**
RIGHT **Dual-wielding quickly feels so natural it's hard to remember what *Oblivion* was like without it. *Skyrim* remembers combinations of weapons: if you put a two-handed weapon away in favour of a shortsword or fire spell in your right hand, the game will put whatever you most frequently dual-wield with it into your left**







Design showcase

Bethesda has moved away from procedural generation. Though sets of prefab elements are used to build most of the levels, even the most throwaway dungeon or cave has personality





ABOVE **Trolls are familiar to players of *Oblivion*, but much of *Skyrim*'s bestiary has been reconsidered with the cold, hostile mountains in mind.**
LEFT **Khajiit have innate night-vision, but we were pleased to find we didn't need it to navigate Skyrim.**
RIGHT **Worship of the nine gods is prevalent in Skyrim, and praying at their shrines commutes power. This shrine to Talos is found in Whiterun**

H|Y
P|E

BORDERLANDS 2

Gearbox promises a sequel worthy of the name

Publisher	2K Games
Developer	Gearbox
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	US
Release	2012



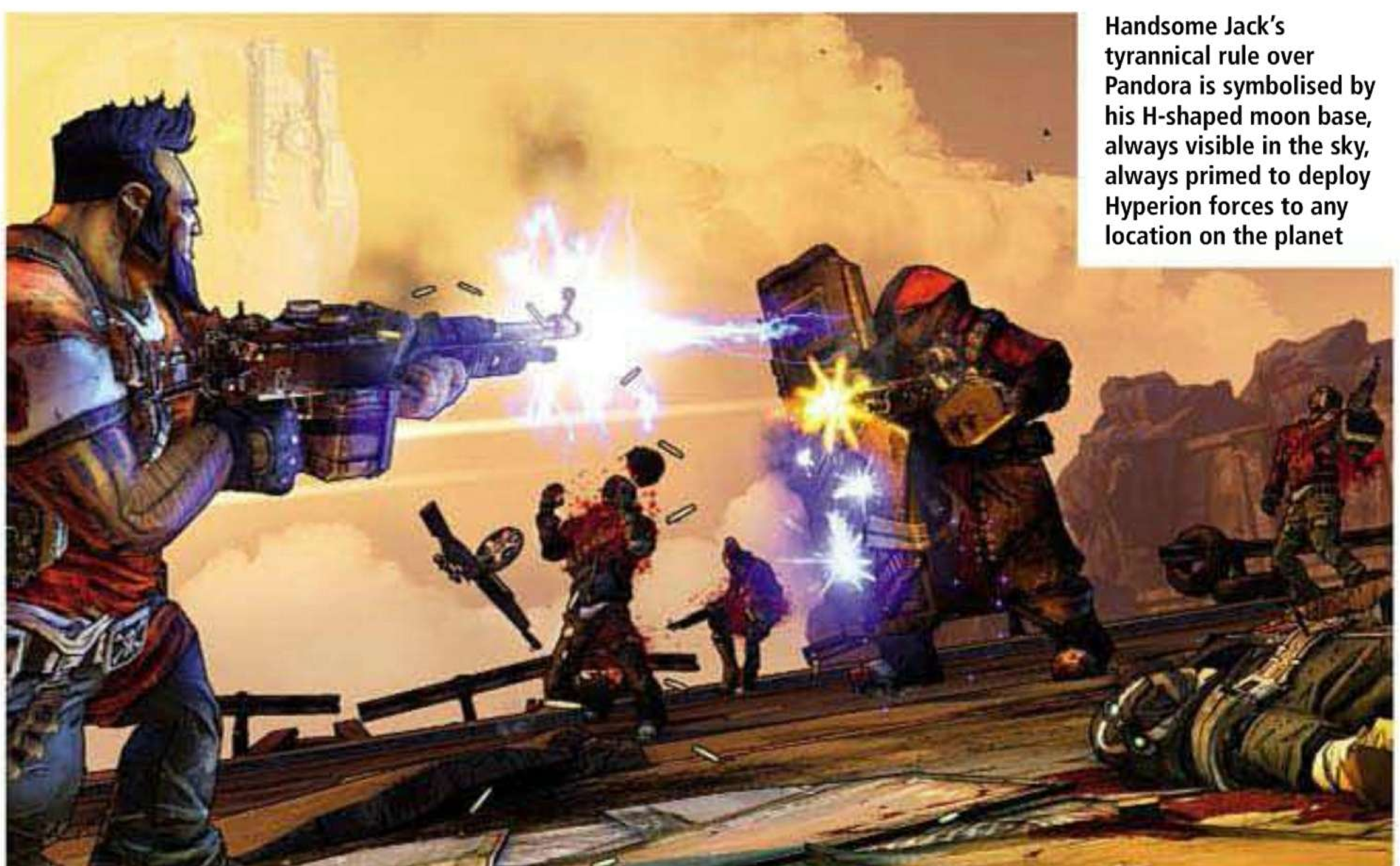
Heavily armed dwarf Salvador (nicknamed 'Gunzerker' in the game) is one of four playable characters



BORDERLANDS 2



Taking inspiration from Infinity Ward's system, experience points are awarded for completing challenges as well as side missions, such as defeating a set number of foes while using a specific weapon



Handsome Jack's tyrannical rule over Pandora is symbolised by his H-shaped moon base, always visible in the sky, always primed to deploy Hyperion forces to any location on the planet

It's clear that the resounding, ongoing success of *Borderlands* has been something of a surprise to developer Gearbox Software. It's not that the team didn't believe in the game. Far from it. But any plucky newcomer attempting to muscle its way into the overcrowded firstperson shooter marketplace, where the titans suck the air from the atmosphere, risks suffocation before it has chance to blurt its name to the world.

Borderlands triumphed where many others have failed, however, etching its name on to the hearts of many players through a combination of distinctive visuals, smart writing, engaging RPG breadcrumb trails and, of course, the millions of randomised loot-drop weapons.

As such, the decision to replace almost all of the original's core systems for this sequel seems curious. "We are tired of content-dump sequels," explains Gearbox's VP, **Steve Gibson**. "So many developers take the original game, shove in a bunch of new levels and add a '2' to the name. We don't believe that gamers receive a true sequel that way. So when we finished work on the first *Borderlands* in 2009 we began to think about what we might want to do next with the mythology. Almost immediately we began replacing or reworking just about every major system in the game."

Players who found *Borderlands'* appeal in its armoury needn't fear, however: this sequel packs a similarly far-reaching array of weapons. And they're far more clearly delineated now, matching their statistical variety with visual distinctiveness. A number of different fictional arms manufacturers supply *Borderlands 2* with its over-generous cache of weapons, and each manufacturer has its own style and theme of gun.

Vladav's guns, for example, have rotating barrels and an accelerating rate of fire. Tediore's guns, meanwhile, are like disposable razors, so cheap and throwaway that they cannot be reloaded: once the clip inside is exhausted they must be thrown away as an explosive. The twist is that the more ammo left in the clip when thrown, the greater the impact of the explosion.

> ***"All the areas you can see you can walk to. We want a sense of world and place"***

Bandits now have their own Heath Robinson gun economy, too. "What was odd about *Borderlands*," Gibson notes, "was we had these bandits, but they weren't making weapons for themselves. We have added those in. Very haphazard, and taped together, they make up for their lack of style and reliability with giant clips."

The game opens five years after The Vault – a previously mythical treasure trove of alien technology and wealth – was opened. Your character has been left for dead in the open country, your mission simply to meet up with a friend and exact revenge on Handsome Jack, new CEO of the Hyperion Corporation. "All the areas you can see on the horizon you can actually walk to," Gibson says. "We want players to feel that sense of world and place so when they actually set out for a destination in the draw distance, they can arrive there."

The team's focus has been on bringing the dust bowl of Pandora to life, injecting every scene with motion and energy to create the



Climbing the skill tree

Gibson is eager to point out that the RPG levelling tree part of the game extends high and wide: "In many games you receive your base skill and upgrade this in interesting ways during the lower levels. But by level 20 your character no longer changes in meaningful ways and, as such, the game becomes less exciting on that level. We want game-changers later in *Borderlands 2*, rewards for players who invest for the long haul. As such it's no longer a case of earning a few points' worth of buff for a particular area of your character's abilities late into the game. We have desirable, game-changing skills late in the levelling tree."

The four vault-hunting characters from the original make a return as its damsels in distress, who must be rescued from Hyperion en route to the final faceoff with Handsome Jack

sense of a living world. The level of detail that's gone into weapons is also applied to environment and character animations, enemies limping and hobbling when injured. Likewise the AI has been overhauled, enemies ducking for cover or searching for cars or stalactites to hurl at you in scenes that appear scripted but are in fact wholly dynamic.

Just as much effort has been expended on the quirky humour that marked out the first game. One battle has you taking down robots as they arrive on the scene, freshly fired on to Pandora from Hyperion's supply base on a nearby moon. Look to the sky and you can see each missile turn from hazy pinprick to screaming torpedo before it lands with a dull thud in the soil. In another scene, a Nomad torturer boss bursts through steel doors carrying a giant shield with a midget strapped to it. Free the midget from its constraints and it'll either turn on you or on its tormentor, the multiple cliques in the world (and their inherent dislike of each other) making multi-faction firefights unpredictable and strategic.

These improvements are joined by a raft of smaller tweaks to improve the details. Splitscreen co-op now extends online, making it even easier to assemble a four-man team, and when you do, all four of you can now ride in the game's vehicles – which, Gibson assures us, "no longer get stuck on tiny rocks." A new mini-map is now a permanent part of the screen furniture so you no longer have to press the back button to find out where you are, while a dynamic, clock-locked quest system means that time is often of the essence. As Gibson explains: "More than anything we want players to appreciate how much work we put into this, to appreciate our vision of a true sequel." ■



bit.ly/oT7e4U
Screenshot gallery

HYPE

THE WITNESS

Jonathan Blow goes to fantasy island in his follow-up to Braid

Publisher | Thekla
Developer | In-house
Format | PC
Origin | US
Release | 2012

The Witness's island setting features a series of gently surreal landmarks, each the centrepiece of a set of puzzles with a common theme. Though the bulk of puzzles are based in the blue panels, some are subtly connected with their environments, while you'll need to move objects in some locations in order to progress any further



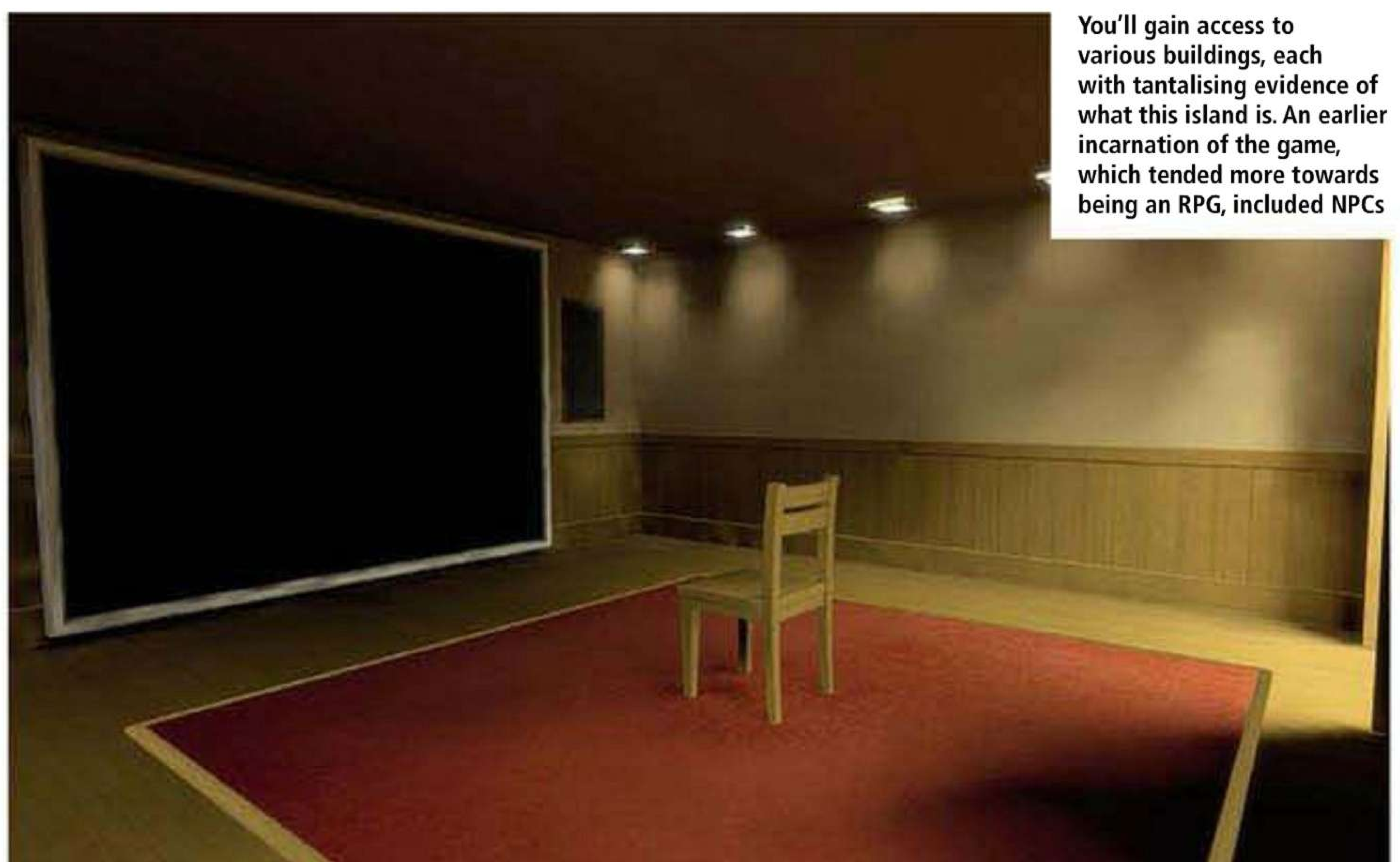
bit.ly/prwqQa
Further discussion with Jonathan Blow







The Witness is powered by a proprietary engine that's designed to emphasise light, shape and colour to aid your comprehension of what you can interact with, but though the game already looks starkly beautiful, the 3D models and textures are far from complete



You'll gain access to various buildings, each with tantalising evidence of what this island is. An earlier incarnation of the game, which tended more towards being an RPG, included NPCs

The Witness opens in the comfort of a dimly lit, confined corridor. Through the closed door at its end lies a small sunlit room that looks out over a garden bounded by a high wall and a gate locked with pink force fields. The lack of freedom feels reassuring, presenting a gentle and wordless tutorial in the basics of *The Witness*'s blend of exploration and puzzle-solving. But the island that lies outside is quite the opposite – this is an experiment in non-linear game design.

The way designer **Jonathan Blow** has chosen to demonstrate the game strangely mirrors its hands-off approach. Severely jetlagged on this hot, early autumn afternoon, he simply leaves us to play without introduction or instruction as he takes a lie down in the darkened bedroom of his stifling hotel suite.

Not that he's actually required – the game elegantly outlines interaction purely through suggestion. On the door into the sunlit room is a panel displaying a horizontal line that begins on its left with a bulb – on pressing the controller's A button the view focuses on the panel and brings up a cursor. Moving the cursor over the bulb and pressing A again allows you to draw a path along the line, whereupon the door opens.

The next puzzle is a two-parter to power down the force fields. First, to solve several panels that increase in complexity from the line we found on the door through to full mazes, and second, to find three switches hidden around the garden by following wires over walls and through bushes.

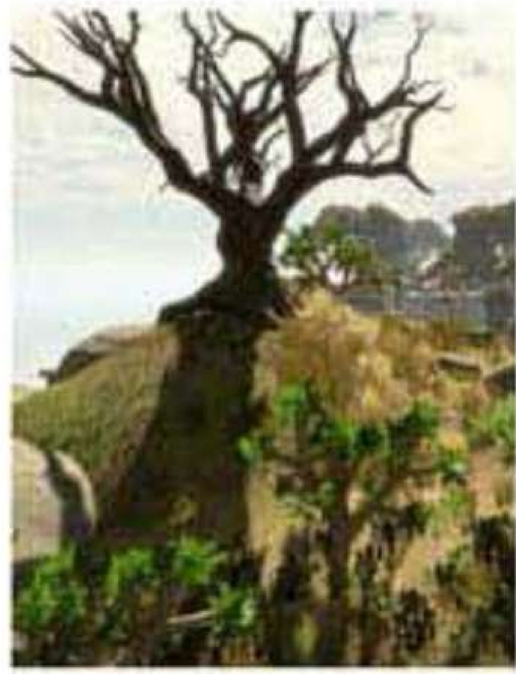
Outside the gate: a red windmill in the distance, ancient ruins criss-crossed with cables and machines, a dead tree surrounded by yellowed grass, low modernist bunkers, and the sea all around. And everywhere in this quiet blend of Portmeirion and *Myst* are clusters of blue panels. Though the essential interaction of drawing a line from point to exit remains constant over the many panel puzzles we try, they're remarkably diverse. But you can only understand their largely abstract rules through experimentation.

> *"Freedom and openness facilitate more player choice. That's the heart of games"*

And yet Blow isn't afraid of showing puzzles that are practically incomprehensible. We defy you not to try the first panel you see after passing through the gate. But it's pretty much impossible to solve before you've explored further because it brings in new puzzle elements – black and white markers, and a choice of starting position for your line.

"It sets up a challenge," says Blow after his nap. "It creates a miniature arc in a lightweight way, a gameplay structure. It's the player's goal-directedness – no one's giving you a quest to solve it." And it's the key to *The Witness*'s philosophy. With the freedom to tackle its challenges in any order you wish, it's up to you to create your own goals. "If you play a linear game where you pick up a key and then get to a door and use it, then the door might as well not be there. So there's something about running into that block then coming back to it. It's structurally interesting."

This, along with being able to finish the game having completed only five of seven challenges, which you achieve through solving geographically discrete sets of panels, also allows some puzzles to be hard. Really hard.



Story threads

As with *Braid*, *The Witness* features a layer of enigmatic storytelling that sits above the core puzzle game, told through clues in the environment and voice recordings found dotted around the island. But unlike *Braid*, *The Witness* has to take into account its non-linearity, so the different geographical areas contain discrete 'threads of thought'. "The idea being if you add a bunch of those together you get something really nice," Blow explains. The voice quotes Richard Feynman and rambles about shaving and hairlines, introducing a human presence into its otherwise emotionally sterile surreality.



The core development team numbers three, with several others helping out, including an architect and landscape architect to work on the island's design, but while Blow wants them to think about the game design, they've tended to focus on making it look pretty



"Because I don't expect players to solve them all," Blow explains. "In many modern linear games it's as if puzzles have been beaten out of them. They're still there, but they're fake puzzles. It gets to be almost a stupid, time-wasting activity a lot of the time. To me, a puzzle is something you might never figure out. A lot of modern game design just isn't conducive to that. If you come to a puzzle in a linear game that you can't get, then you can't play the rest of the game you just paid for."

Yes, Blow being Blow, *The Witness* is on one level a resolute criticism of other games. "*The Witness* trusts the player more, in that you can go your own way, but you can come back and explore the basics. Modern games have trained players to expect a certain thing. So if they don't tell you exactly what you're doing next, you feel like you're in freefall and ask: 'What do I do?' I don't feel good about that. If games are good at interactivity, isn't it a shame if interactivity is only allowed in very strict ways? Something about freedom and openness facilitates more player choice. To me, that's the heart of games."

Braid had the appeal of *Mario* references and the immediacy of the 2D platformer to make its intricacies easier to swallow. But *The Witness* sports an austerity that's far less welcoming to broader audiences. And yet its philosophy of open-endedness and respect for players' intelligence and curiosity could make it Blow's most exciting work yet.

It's unfortunate, then, that *The Witness*'s experiments therefore seem likely to be confined to players who are already interested in such ideas. What if he designed these ideas for *COD* fans? A harder job, for sure, but surely a more important one if they're to gain traction in the mainstream arena. ■

Q&A Jonathan Blow

Designer, *The Witness*



You're self-publishing *The Witness* – how are you making it work financially?

We have a $2 million budget, but to make that money back this game doesn't have to sell as many as *Braid* did. So it's not super risky. I don't think there's much competition with a game like this. But I think there's a lot of people who want to play a game like it. Even if it's ten per cent of gamers, that's huge to an indie developer.

***Minecraft* has popularised the idea among indie game creators of developing and releasing their work incrementally – does that seem like an attractive way of working for you?**

It wouldn't work for this game, but it's an interesting approach, absolutely. It would be fun to do. You get a different level of communication within the game, and I would like to do it someday, but this isn't the game for it because it would spoil the whole thing. I wonder what those console platforms are going to do when this type of development becomes more widespread in the future, because I think it will.

We'll still have both types of games – the finished article that's perfectly tied up, and the exploratory type where you, the player, are along for the development ride. If I worked with consoles I'd be wanting to find out how we can make that more possible.

Why haven't you slated *The Witness* for release on console?

We like the 360 and the PS3, but their specifications are over five years old now, and that's a lot in computer years. The kind of tricks we'd have to perform to get this game working on those platforms are such a lot of work that to port it over at this point is just not worth it for us. We hope to make back the budget of this game through Steam and iOS, plus I would like to make a profit. But breaking even is the most important thing as it allows me to keep making games, and I can do that without consoles.

Maybe this time next year I'll be singing a completely different tune because I found out I was wrong, but I don't think so. By the time this game comes out in a year or more, we might already be on iPad 4. We would have to compress the game for that platform, but we don't have to do the certification stuff we would have to on consoles, so we can live with doing just one of those giant tasks. And I like this as an iPad game. It's a natural thing. But we'll see how that plays out.

With jets, helicopters, tanks, jeeps, buggies and, on PC at least, 64 players fighting on a single server, *Battlefield 3* is operating at a whole different scale to its modern combat rivals. But is it offering much that's new to veterans of the series?

HYPE

BATTLEFIELD 3

What can the epic modern shooter offer to series vets and curious COD fans?

Publisher	EA
Developer	DICE
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Sweden
Release	October

Battlefield 3 is expanding on *Bad Company 2*'s already destructible environment. That means that every piece of cover can now be shredded by enemy fire, and nowhere is safe. If you do die, the squad system remains the fastest way to get back to the frontlines

After *Battlefield 2*, DICE's firstperson combat franchise divided its forces across many fronts: the console-focused *Bad Company*; free-to-play titles *Battlefield Heroes* and *Battlefield Play 4 Free*; and the downloadable *Battlefield 1943*. What is it in *Battlefield 3*, then, that justifies the '3', and the implied status as a sequel to the main *Battlefield* series that comes with it?

Playing the game, it quickly becomes clear that it's not merely the graphics that have made a leap forward. The 64-player map Caspian Border – 64 players when played on PC, at least – features grassy fields, small groups of deserted buildings, a huge burning forest in the distance, and an enormous red-and-white tower in the centre of the map. It's huge. And stunning. Indeed, Caspian Border manages to make 64 players feel like a small amount, and even those who make use of the returning squad system (which ties your spawns to a small unit of allies) will find the action broken up by eerie moments of calm, when you and your friends are alone in a field, only able to hear the gunfire over the next ridge.

What you do once you get over that ridge has hardly changed since the release of *Bad Company 2*. Two teams fight for control of capture points littered across the landscape, and players still do so on foot or in vehicles, utilising four mostly familiar classes (Assault, Support, Engineer and Recon), with a simple levelling system unlocking new weapons and equipment.

The other major change from *Bad Company 2*, and the reason for the new scale, is the return of *Battlefield 2*'s fighter jets. Spawning at each team's base, they are an easy joy to fly. They also up the ante when it comes to the destructible scenery,

The Caspian Border map manages to make 64 players feel like a small amount

theoretically able to take down even vast structures such as that red-and-white tower.

In practice, however, the jets prove to be most effective against other jets rather than ground units, meaning that their pilots are almost playing a completely different game from those fighting on the ground. It doesn't matter, though. The scale of the maps and the sight of other players dogfighting overhead, or skirmishing down below, work together to make players feel like they're playing the part of a small, insignificant cog





bit.ly/pHXAXT
More discussion with Patrick Liu



In its singleplayer and cooperative modes, *Battlefield 3* borrows numerous familiar tropes from *Call Of Duty*. That includes plenty of shouty bombast and a lot of heavily scripted combat



in a much larger, thundering war machine. Being insignificant can feel wonderful, it turns out.

The game's twoplayer cooperative mode fared less well during our time with it. The mission we played featured two soldiers fighting to extract a rebel from a miscellaneous building in a miscellaneous Middle Eastern city. Beginning in the basement with eyes on two enemy soldiers, the players must take their shots at the same time in order to prevent either enemy alerting their nearby allies. Much of the mission that follows demands a similar level of subtletey; it's implied that if we're spotted, the level gets harder. Perhaps we're just terrible, but we couldn't confirm this because we never *weren't* spotted.

After securing the rebel upstairs, you and your partner bundle him into a Humvee waiting outside. It's then your job to scout ahead until, inevitably, you're ambushed by enemy soldiers appearing in the windows lining the ruined streets. You're given a choice at this point of sticking with your machine-gun or switching to a sniper rifle via a conveniently placed weapon crate, but it's a dull choice and a difficult scenario. It's the one moment when *Battlefield* feels like a pale imitator of *Call Of Duty*; the tiresome slogs against respawning baddies can grate in Activision's series, but at least it can lay claim to having done them first.

Take too many hits and you'll end up prone, only able to use your pistol until your partner revives you. It's a familiar mechanic, designed to create dramatic rescues and foster camaraderie. As usual, though, if one player dies trying to save the other the mission ends, fostering only arguments and guilt.

What ends up making *Battlefield 3* worthy of that numeral, then, might simply be that it's bringing these different elements of *Battlefield* games together for the first time. The previous game to be given the same status, *Battlefield 2*, included only multiplayer. Since then, DICE has used the *Bad Company* series to conquer consoles, explore singleplayer modes, and develop technology to support destructible environments, but at the expense of some of the earlier game's grander scope. *Battlefield 3* may not be making bold leaps forward, but in weaving some of the disparate threads of the series back into one game, it's providing a reason for *COD* fans to consider a leap of their own. ■

Take too many hits and you'll end up prone, only able to use your pistol

Q&A
Patrick Liu
Producer, DICE



You're using technology from EA Sports in *Battlefield 3*, and *Need For Speed: The Run* is powered by Frostbite 2 – has sharing technology with EA studios been very beneficial?
Yeah. I would say that the main difference [for us] is down to the animation system. A big part of AI is animation and how that works. We implemented the ANT animation system from EA Sports so it looks very fluid and very realistic. We brought that over to *Battlefield*, so all the AI and even you and your co-players are moving around very smoothly and fluidly.

Need For Speed is using Frostbite 2 and there are other studios looking at it as well. It's one of the most powerful pieces of tech [available]. We've made our choices about what to focus on in animation, the big scale in our maps, the destruction, the rendering and lighting and also the sound engine – the award-winning sounds that we've had. We are focusing on very specific areas with the engine, and we think we are the best at what we are doing.

***Battlefield 3*'s environments are more urban than anything in *Bad Company 2*, but there are many structures players can't demolish. Is destruction as integral to *Battlefield 3*?**
We've been focusing on different scales of destruction, from the smallest 'micro-destruction', as we call it – just chipping off pieces of small objects – to blowing up whole facades. If you're playing in Paris and you shoot with a tank or RPG you can see a whole facade falling down and see the interior of the building. The actual big houses can fall over – it's to that extent we're doing the urban environments. We still find people that haven't discovered *Bad Company* previously and they play *BF3* for the first time. What we call 'tactical destruction' is a fundamental part of the strategy – when I see a wall now I instinctively blow through it, but people not used to it will still run around. It changes the game completely.

With fewer players and smaller maps, are console players getting less of a game?
They're definitely not getting less of a game. It has the same amount of destruction and the same amount of visual fidelity. It's also misconception I've seen on the Internet that the console version won't have jets – that's not true. We've scaled the maps accordingly for console so it makes the pacing all right and the balancing is good. If you play a big conquest map then the map is balanced accordingly.

H | Y
P | E

DISHONORED

Arkane's plague-ridden playground welcomes creative murder

Publisher	Bethesda
Developer	Arkane Studios
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	France
Release	Q2 2012

It's perhaps too enthusiastic to suggest that games defined by open-ended design and convincing simulation (the so-called 'immersive sims') are back in vogue. For one, there was a four-year hiatus between *BioShock* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. For another: was this particular genre blend ever really fashionable? Nevertheless, there's certainly a nudging towards the mainstream for a genre mix that initially seemed more comfortable delivering a rare cult classic rather than a regular centre-stage blockbuster.

Dishonored undoubtedly has ambitions in that direction, matching its smart design with an execution that oozes style, class and budget. *Half-Life 2*'s architect, Viktor Antonov, provides the world which, as in Valve's seminal title, sees layers of historical detail applied to the streets and vistas to build a rare sense of authenticity and place. You play as Corvo, a supernatural assassin wrongly accused of murdering his former boss, now escaped from jail and in search of revenge. But the design-led approach stops at the premise. Thereafter, the designers simply press a set of rules into your hands and allow you to proceed as you see fit.

In the playthrough we are shown behind closed doors at Gamescom, creative director Raphael Colantonio shows a 30-minute mission in which Corvo is tasked with

There's a layer of steampunk not only to the world, with its iron, alt-industrial-revolution monorails, but also in the enemy walker suits (below) which counter their fragile design with devastating firepower





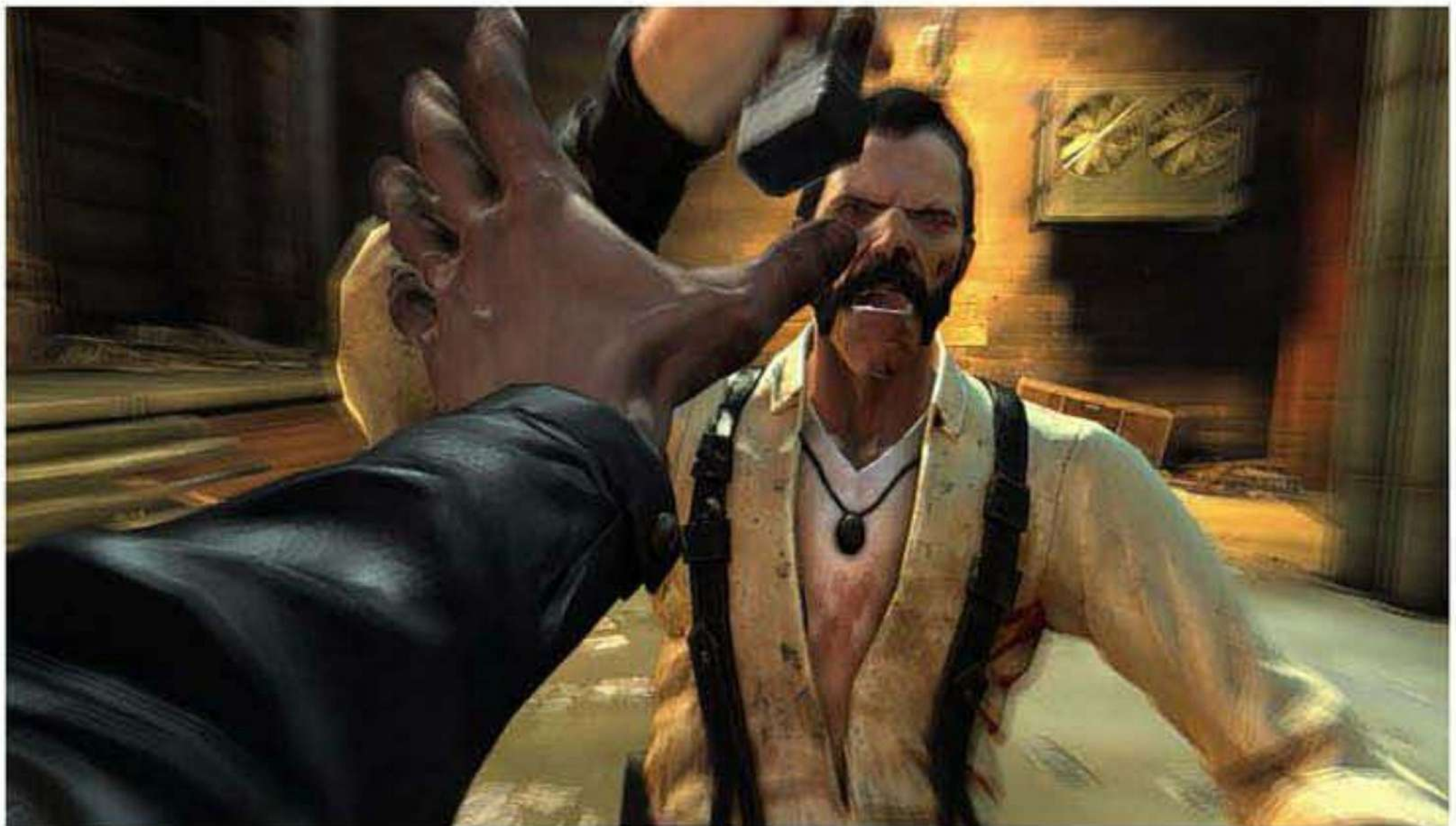
bit.ly/nhhg8D
Screenshot gallery



London, 1666, amid the grip of the plague, was clearly the starting point, the artists stitching together formative industrial evolution with the supernatural to create something that's both fresh and familiar at once



Your primary weapons are a sword and crossbow, while 'grenades' (tightly packed bundles of nails and glass) can be used to maim and kill



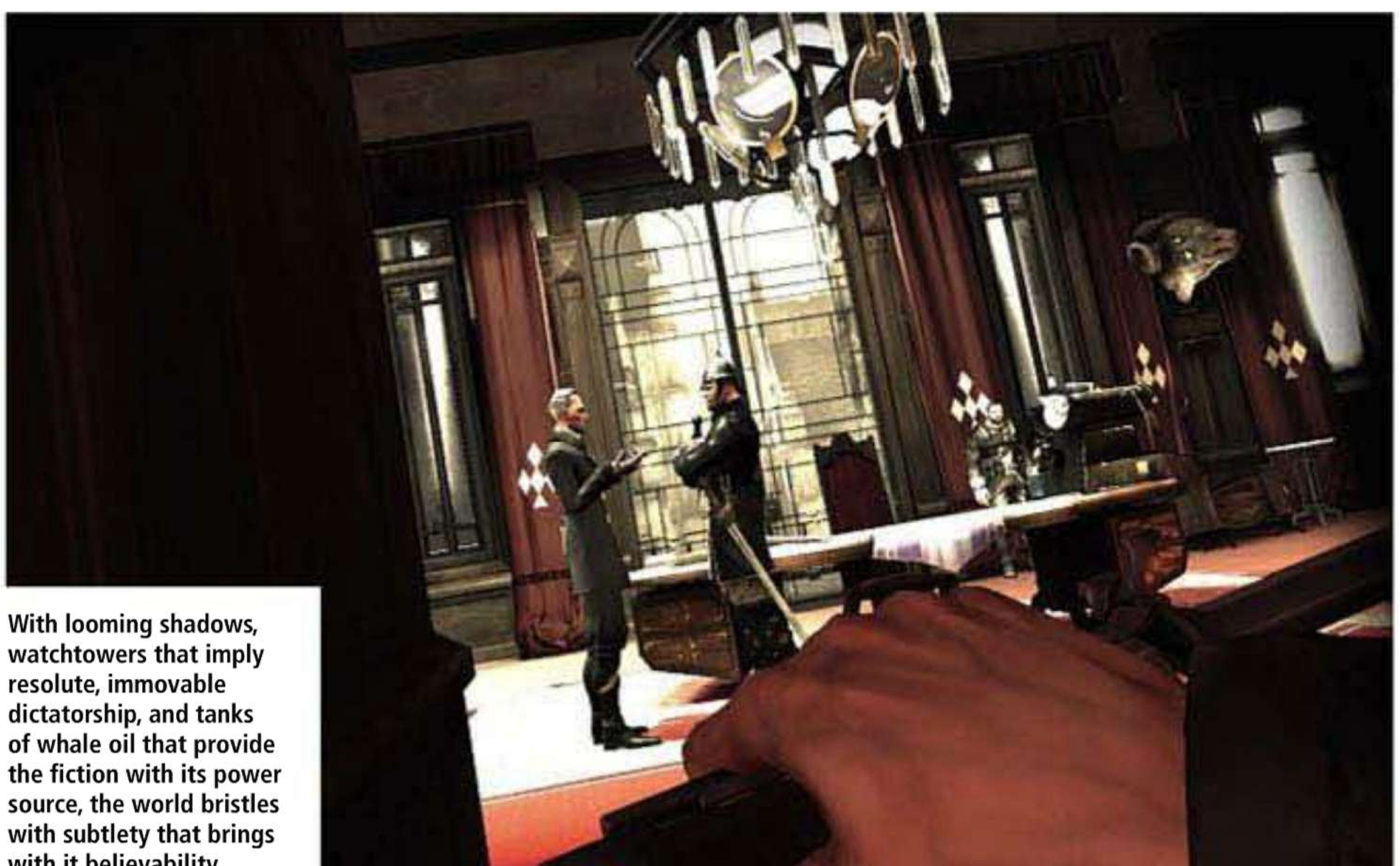
assassinating a crooked lawyer who has been accusing families of having the plague, then evicting them from their homes in order to extort their money. As he plays it immediately becomes clear that, once you have your objective, you are very much on your own, success and failure hinging on your own creativity and ability to successfully execute your own plans.

Players can be surgical assassins, only killing (or putting to sleep) those who stand in Corvo's way or, alternatively, taking a more brutal approach – eliminating everyone in his path via the wide range of skills in his armoury. He can teleport his way towards targets, or possess living creatures in order

Once you have an objective, success and failure hinge on your creativity and ability

to work towards his objective. Supernatural powers allow him to jump distances otherwise beyond human abilities, and during gun battles he can freeze time and take a moment to admire a bullet suspended in mid-air, three feet from its smoking chamber.

Every single building in the world has numerous entry points, and the example in this demo has seven. To reach the corrupt lawyer, Colantonio whistles an arrow past the head of a guard outside the building; it thuds into an outer wall and he turns to look. Sneaking past the distracted guard into a nearby alleyway, Corvo then possesses a handy plague rat, using it to crawl through a ventilation duct into the lawyer's house. Still in rat form, he frightens off a maid to ensure that the coast is clear, before transforming back into his human form, ready to pad up the stairs to his target's office. After spying him through the keyhole, the assassin bursts in, pausing time as the lawyer's bodyguards pull their pistols, before positioning himself in front of the target and blasting him through the window.



With looming shadows, watchtowers that imply resolute, immovable dictatorship, and tanks of whale oil that provide the fiction with its power source, the world bristles with subtlety that brings with it believability

A Chaos system tempers the overuse of your more overt behaviours. Kill people without hiding their bodies, for example, and the world itself will respond, perhaps introducing more rats which cause a rise in the number of plague-infected people on the streets.

Emergent play comes not only from the tools in your hands but also your positioning in the world. Eavesdrop on key conversations and you'll unlock additional missions to take on, while impromptu world events can be eliminated before they even occur if you take out the future antagonists earlier in the game.

Whether or not *Dishonored* represents a slip into fashion for the immersive sim – if indeed the game can be pinned down into what is, at best, a slippery genre to define – it already represents a rare achievement in combining first-rate world building with a playpen for the imaginatively cruel. ■

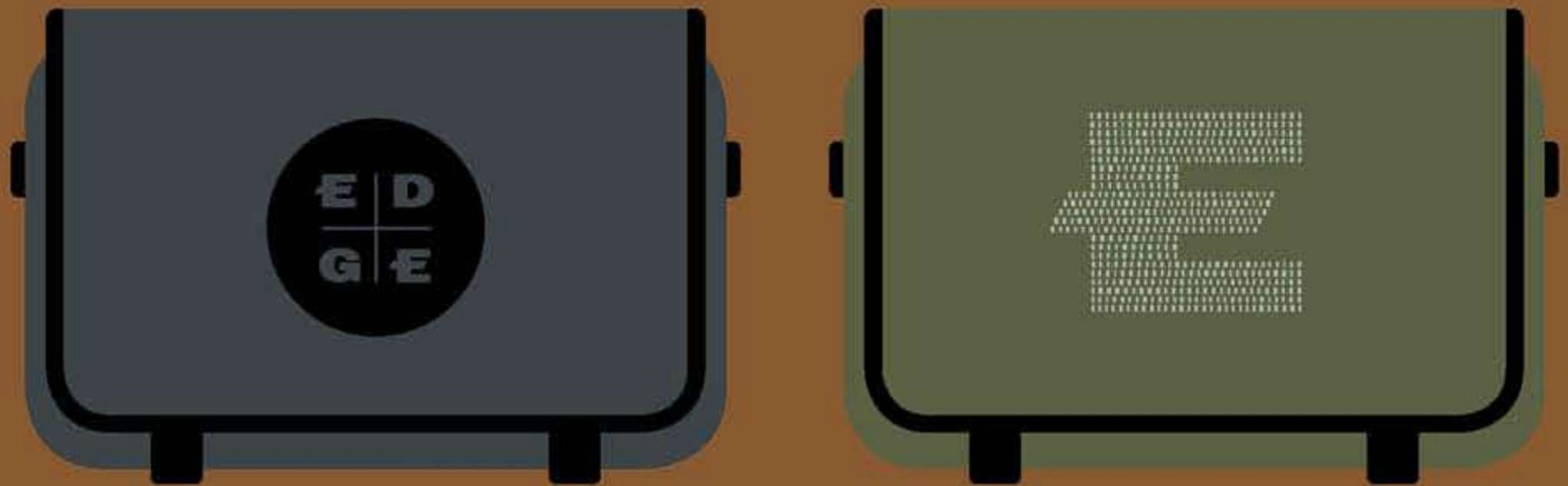


Rentokil

Dishonored's world is infected, not by zombies or vampires, but by a threat closer to home: plague. As in 1666 London, that plague has a carrier: vermin. *Dishonored*'s rats are far more than just dressing, however, and come with their own complex AI behaviours. Harmless when encountered alone, they will attack when in large groups, overwhelming their prey with sheer numbers. They are also attracted to dead bodies, drawing attention to kills if you're not careful. Upgrade the ability that allows you to possess other creatures and they become a vital ally too, granting you access to houses via drainpipes and shafts.

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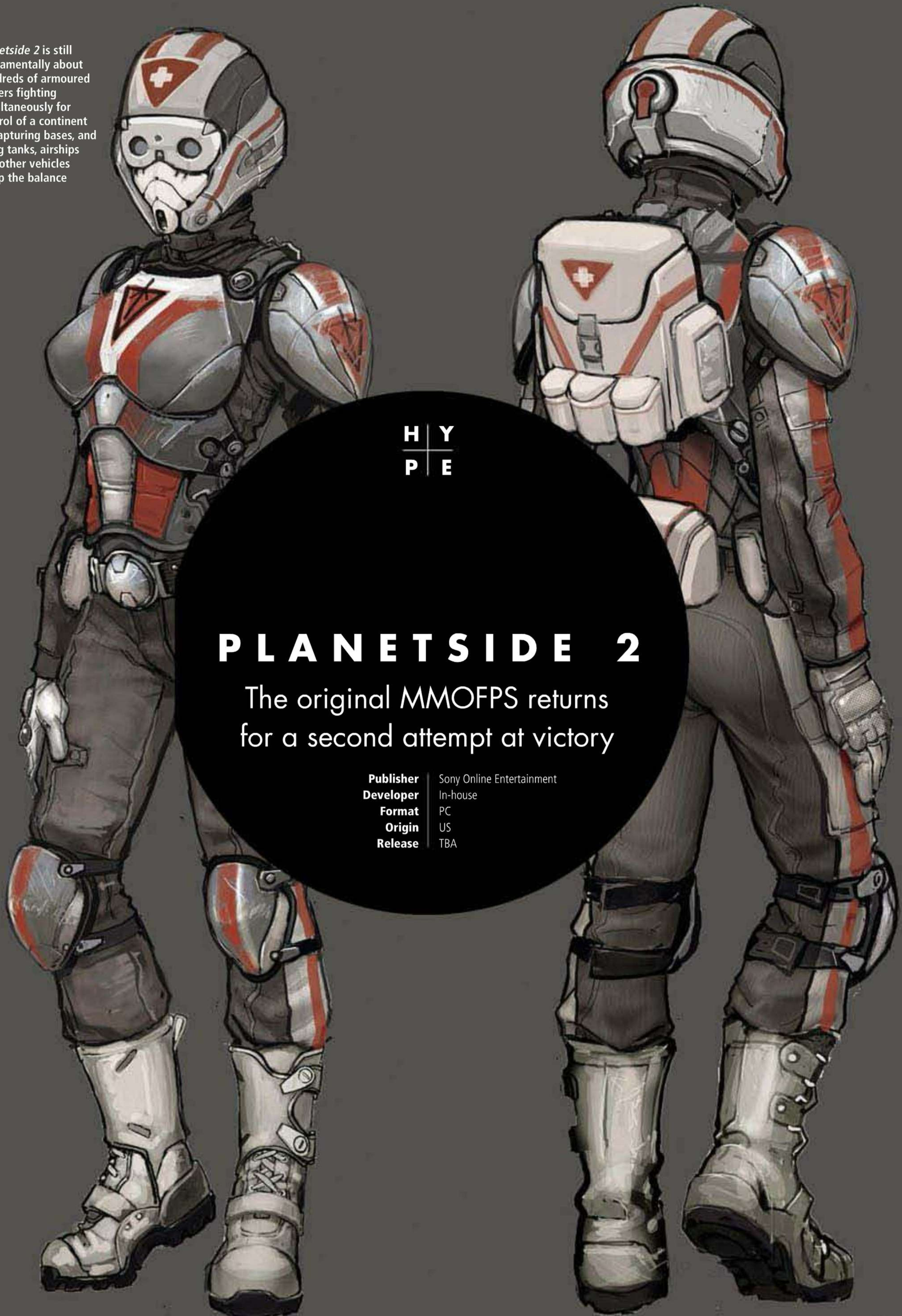
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Planetside 2 is still fundamentally about hundreds of armoured players fighting simultaneously for control of a continent by capturing bases, and using tanks, airships and other vehicles to tip the balance



HYPE

PLANETSIDE 2

The original MMOFPS returns for a second attempt at victory

Publisher	Sony Online Entertainment
Developer	In-house
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	TBA



Better networking code means that *Planetside 2*'s weapons now work more like those in traditional shooters, with bullets that take time to travel to their target and dip with range

I'm not surprised at all that there aren't more MMOFPSes out there, because they're fucking hard to make." **Matt Higby** should know. As the creative director of *Planetside 2*, he's been given a near impossible task. His job is to take the cult hit *Planetside*, the forefather of the massively multiplayer firstperson shooter, and revive it in a way that both satisfies those rose-tinted memories and makes the new game a much larger success.

"I think it's tragic that *Planetside 1* wasn't more of a blockbuster, because it was really just ahead of its time," Higby says. "That sounds arrogant to say, but honestly, when that game came out, there were 400,000 subscription gamers in the United States. There wasn't a huge market for that kind of thing; there wasn't wide broadband adoption or hardware that could support the game."

Today, he's banking on the situation being different. What remains the same in *Planetside 2* is the concept. Like the original, it's still about enormous battles: hundreds of players will fight simultaneously, on the same battlefield, for control of enemy territory. Like the original, those battles take place on a persistent continent, where the frontlines are being continually redrawn between three warring factions: the Terran Republic, the Vanu Sovereignty and the New Conglomerate. Like the original, players will win or lose each battle while fighting on the ground and in the air using airships and hovertanks.



New squad mechanics like being able to spawn next to your leader, rather than back at base, stop matches becoming chaotic or slow battles of attrition

If it sounds like a larger, science-fiction *Battlefield 3*, you're not far off. At its most basic, players join the game, pick an objective from the mission system – defend a base, attack a tower – and then are shipped off via dropship to the battle. Back on the ground, they run, shoot and hop into vehicles. "Someone who is familiar with playing *Modern Warfare* or *Battlefield* will feel very comfortable playing *Planetside*," Higby claims.

What makes *Planetside* remarkable is that it operates at a different scale. "I always like to say that those games are like checkers while we're like Risk. You pick up a piece and you move it, but the vastness of it, and the strategy of it, is so much different."

Vehicles and weapons have their own upgrade tree, so an assault rifle can be advanced to unlock scopes, silencers and different firing rates. The aim isn't to make players more powerful the more they level, but more specialised.

The fight for territorial control is where the game really is like Risk, because aside from fighting for structures, factions are fighting for control of resources. Don't want to fight the Vanu when they have railguns on their Magrider tanks? Seize control of all the railguns' fuel, then.

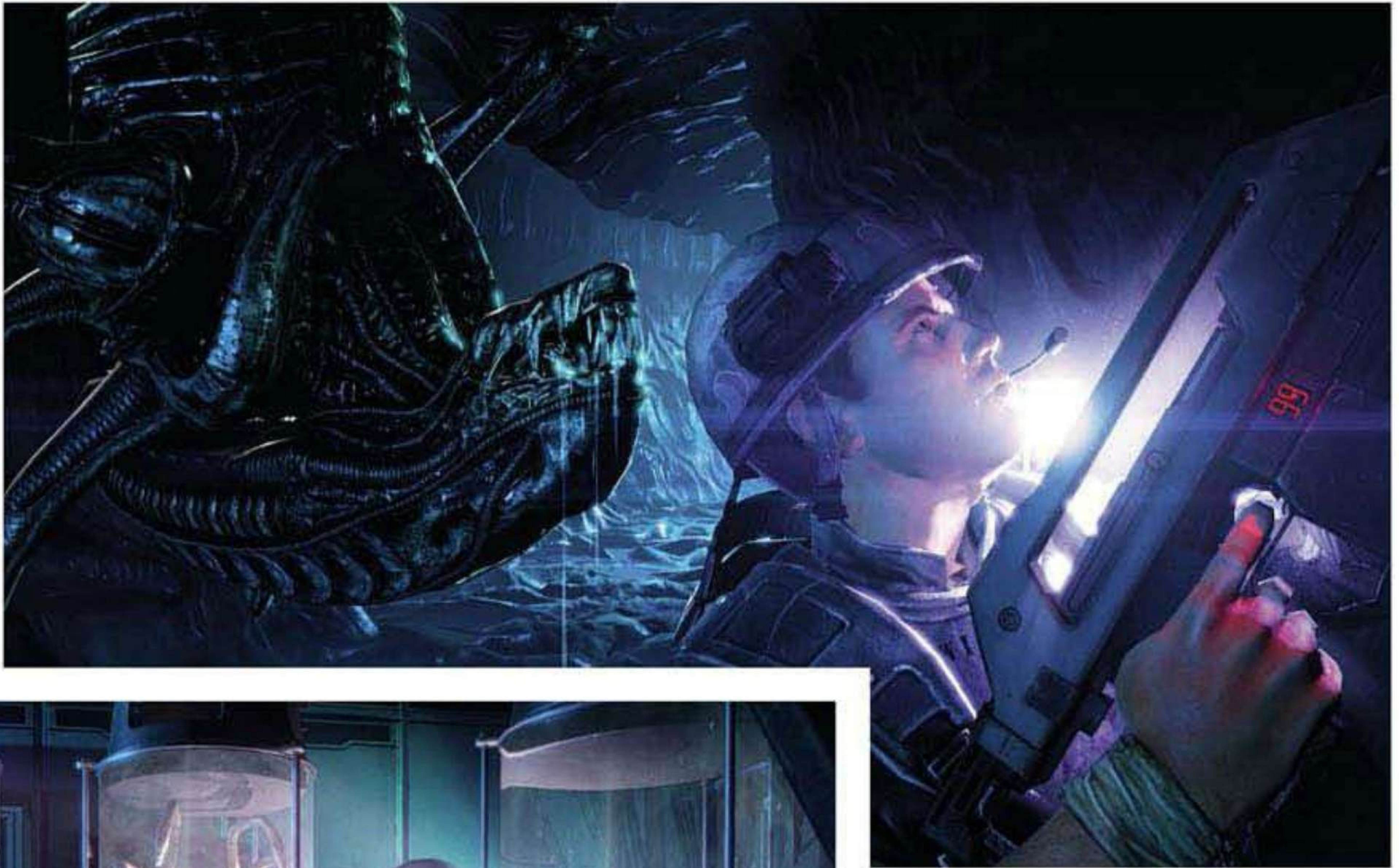
Planetside 2 is a tremendously ambitious game in all the ways the original was, only now with a much greater chance of succeeding. For his part, Higby is confident the team has something special. "We feel that with *Planetside 2* we can make MMOFPS the same kind of buzzword that *EverQuest* made MMORPG into ten years ago." ■



A three-year plan

To help open a dialogue with players, SOE is making public its development plan for the three years after release. Higby mentions that those plans include player-built cities, sea-based combat, and tournament modes designed for e-sports play, but the ultimate course will be chosen by the community. "Maybe we'll think satellite-launching is a really great idea, and maybe they'll think that that's bullshit, but that it's an awesome idea to have mountable Tyrannosaurus Rexes in the game. That's a really cool opportunity to do what the community wants with those long-term plans."

We've spent years pitching Aliens against Predators in various games, but those iconic marines have always felt like a footnote. Gearbox's game aims to change that. Naturally, the weapon designs look authentic, right down to their LED ammo counters, which now feel a little quaint



Colonial Marines is, obviously, based on the second film in the series, but there will be moments that share more in common with the original. Expect tension





Gearbox's new species can't hope to gain the iconographic status of the original xenomorph, but their varying tactics at least promise to bring some surprises to a familiar universe



HYPE

ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

Checking the walls and looking into the eye of the fan-service shooter

Publisher Sega
Developer Gearbox Software
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin US
Release Spring 2012



bit.ly/othba0
Screenshot gallery

Exploiting the geography around you – taking care to seal doors at strategic points – will be an important factor in keeping enemies at bay

There's never been a *truly* great Aliens game. Yes, there's the *Aliens Vs Predator* series, but they were only half Aliens games, and horribly inconsistent into the bargain. *Colonial Marines*, Gearbox's co-op FPS, is an attempt to set things right.

Brian Martell, co-founder of Gearbox alongside the more vociferous Randy Pitchford, is unabashed in his love for the films. "What's *not* to love?" he says. "For me, and for a lot of the guys in the industry, this is the ultimate space marine story. It's the one that influenced all of us."

But that prompts a concern: in a gaming landscape already flattened by the stomping boots of a thousand imitators of the United States Colonial Marine Corps, how do you make an Aliens game feel fresh? Martell isn't worried. "You're never going to be able to please everyone," he says. "It all comes down to what you want from the game." *Colonial Marines* isn't interested in new ideas or mechanics, but in servicing Aliens fans.

The presentation we're shown begins with brief glimpses of the game's backstory. We see two enormous ships in space, including the film's Sulaco, before they both crash on the planet LV-426. We're then introduced to the marines, who are picking themselves up after the crash. A fellow grunt walks over to the player: "You OK?" The response is only a raised middle finger. Vulgar marines? Check.

Outside on the planet's surface, it's a few seconds before those marines are under attack, at first by familiar xenomorphs, and then a new species. It has a rhinocerous-shaped head and charges like a bull, and it forces the marines to flee indoors.

Martell says there will be moments more akin to the tense struggle of the original Alien, but most of the game will offer encounters along the lines of what we've already seen: loud, frenetic, and with dozens of enemies coming at you at once. New species like the rhinomorph – or whatever it ends up being called – will be introduced to stop the game becoming monotonous.

Inside, the marines begin to explore Hadley's Hope, the terraforming colony that played host to most of the second film's action. The marines' tracker starts beeping; there are lots of red dots incoming. The leader orders the player to place some defences in a small corridor, and as soon as the player's done, xenomorphs charge.

These defensive sections will be a staple of the game, and Pitchford compares them to *Left 4 Dead*. The player knows a threat is incoming, and is given time to prepare by placing turrets or welding doors. In our game, the rushing aliens leap from floor to walls to ceiling, overwhelming the turrets, and again the players are forced to flee. It doesn't look like success was ever an option.

Farther inside, safe for a moment behind another closed door, the marines regroup. One of them – an NPC – is inside a cargo mech of the kind Ripley used at the end of Aliens. It's another reference in a game in which Gearbox says you'll even find Bishop's severed legs, still smeared on the hangar bay floor.

Our demo ends with an Alien queen smashing into the hangar, knocking the mech pilot off his feet and rushing for the player. In all, the demo offers a brief, streamlined burst of what players can expect from the game – and that, namely, is Aliens. Yes, you'll be able to weld shut doors. Yes, there will be some hacking. Yes to pretty much anything you ever saw happen in James Cameron's film. If you're desperate to play the experience first seen in cinemas 25 years ago, this seems to be ticking every box.



Resurrection?

The name alone makes clear where *Aliens: Colonial Marines*' allegiances lie, but while it's borrowing some atmosphere from the original, will anything from Alien 3 or Alien: Resurrection make it into the game? "My mum always taught me, always say something nice if you're going to say anything at all," Martell says. "But no, there's elements in both that I love. The movies weren't what they should have been. They weren't what the fans wanted. Everyone wants to set up their own sort of thing, and our game is our answer to that. People loved those marines, and this is our chance to bring back a similar squad."

HYPE

ANARCHY REIGNS

Jack's back in Platinum's eightplayer brawler

Publisher	Sega
Developer	Platinum Games
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	January





The R-trigger can target an opponent, but when locked off, the camera can struggle to choose where to look, especially with so many moving bodies engaging in close-quarters combat

ABOVE **Edgar Oinkie is one of the few characters in the game not to wield a signature weapon. Instead, he makes use of a drug that transforms him into a rotund mutant with a crushing grip**





bit.ly/ozNm6v
Screenshot gallery

Points are awarded not only for hit combos but kill combos too, encouraging players to take enemies down in the most convoluted ways thinkable to keep the killstreak going

Multiplayer small-arena brawlers fell from style following the release of Capcom's bright and bold *Power Stone* titles for Sega's Dreamcast and Naomi arcade hardware. It's difficult to pinpoint why, because outside of an arcade context and on Internet-connected console hardware, this niche within fighting games makes even more sense. It's a point of view firmly shared by Platinum Games, which was eager to show off the eightplayer multiplayer component of its forthcoming brawler, *Anarchy Reigns*, behind closed doors at Gamescom.

Indeed, it appears as though online multiplayer is the primary concern for the developer, working under the steering of its star designer, Atsushi Inaba. The singleplayer campaign is split in two, one half in which you play as Jack Cayman, on loan from Platinum's gory Wii outing *MadWorld*, and a second in which you act as Leo, a police cyborg. Progress in the solo campaign is encouraged and rewarded with new playable characters to be taken online in the multiplayer portion, along with additional move-lists for those avatars, a clear indication of where Platinum's focus rests.

While the game opts for a far more subdued colour palette than *Power Stone*, the idiosyncratic characters, exuberant special moves and fast-paced knockabout action remain wholly intact. In the basic deathmatch mode we play, fighters tussle on a split-level heliport high above a cityscape. The map is, in this era of sprawling online battlefields, uncharacteristically small. But the tight geographical scope works in the game's favour, ensuring that action sets off chain reactions as combatants jump, dive and clash in ticker reeling combos.

Fighters are divided between heavy and lightweight archetypes. Garuda is a mech that switches to plane form in order to close distances, before changing back to deliver heavy blows with its mechanical arms. Jack, as players of *MadWorld* will expect, is also a burly, slower force, swinging his chainsaw to damaging effect. Meanwhile Mathilda, a fellow refugee from *MadWorld*, is svelte and lithe, wielding a spiked purplish club that accessorises nicely with her purple catsuit. In a nod to banned PlayStation brawler *Thrill Kill*, one of her special moves sees her climb on to the back of her opponent before grinding their head with the heel of a stiletto.

In contrast to *Street Fighter*'s showboating specials, the headline moves in this game are triggered with a single button, skill needed not so much in the execution as positioning and timing. Whip out a special move and, while invulnerable for the length of the animation, immediately afterward you are vulnerable to counterattack. The importance of blocking, meanwhile, is matched by the importance of being in the right place at the right time, especially since a clever player will steal another's kill.

Indeed, the designers positively encourage this kind of sneaky point-grabbing. When a player's close to death, a red mark appears over his head as a signal for all. Chaining kills together nets huge score rewards, so a canny player will choose the right moment to wade into the throng and capitalise on the hard work of others.

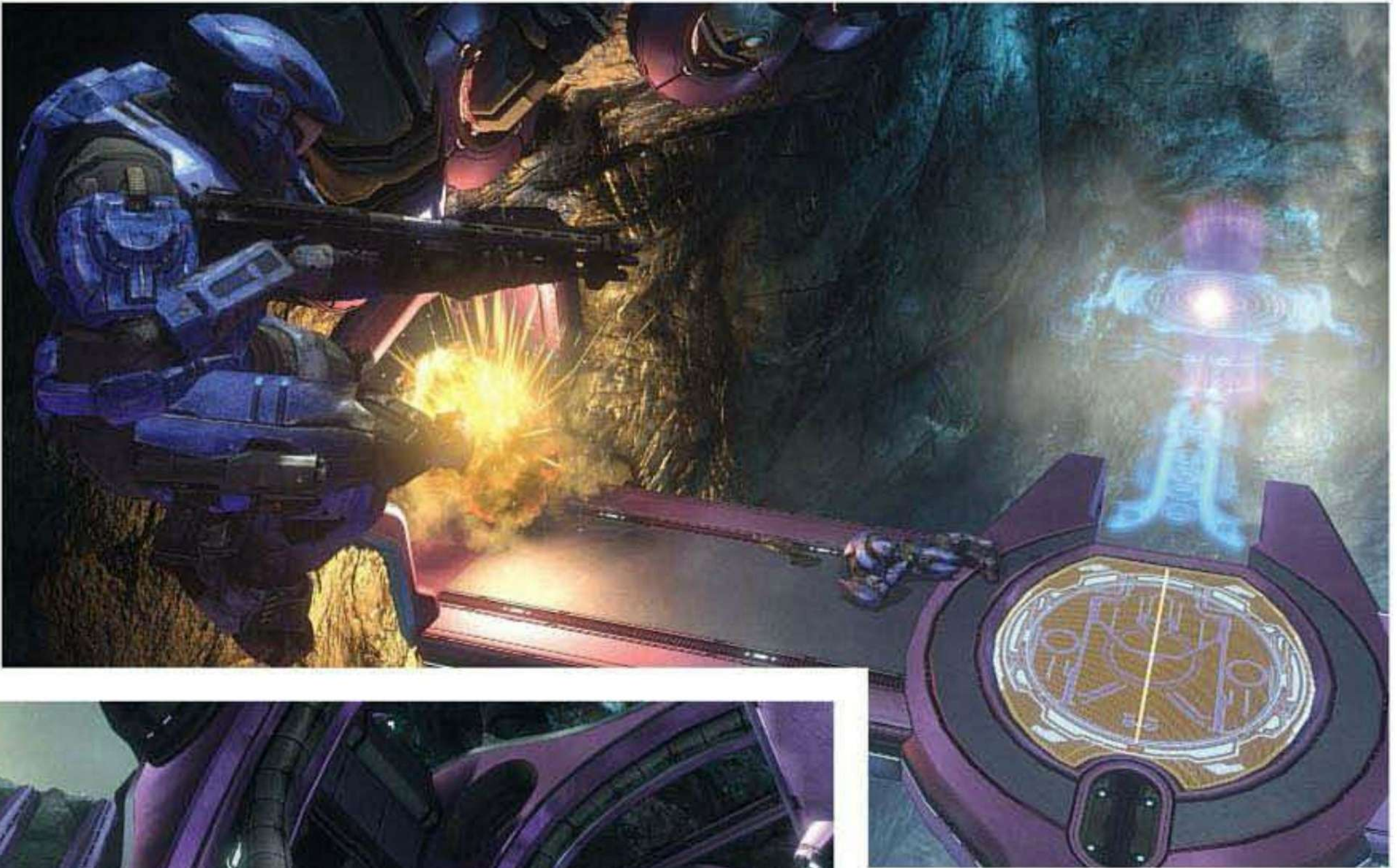
Anarchy Reigns is a brawler that welcomes button mashers in its early stages, but after just a few rounds we found ourselves developing basic strategies that appear set to blossom into more complicated gameplans in time. It's proof that Platinum may well have succeeded in taking its particular brand of skill-based, stylish brawling online. ■



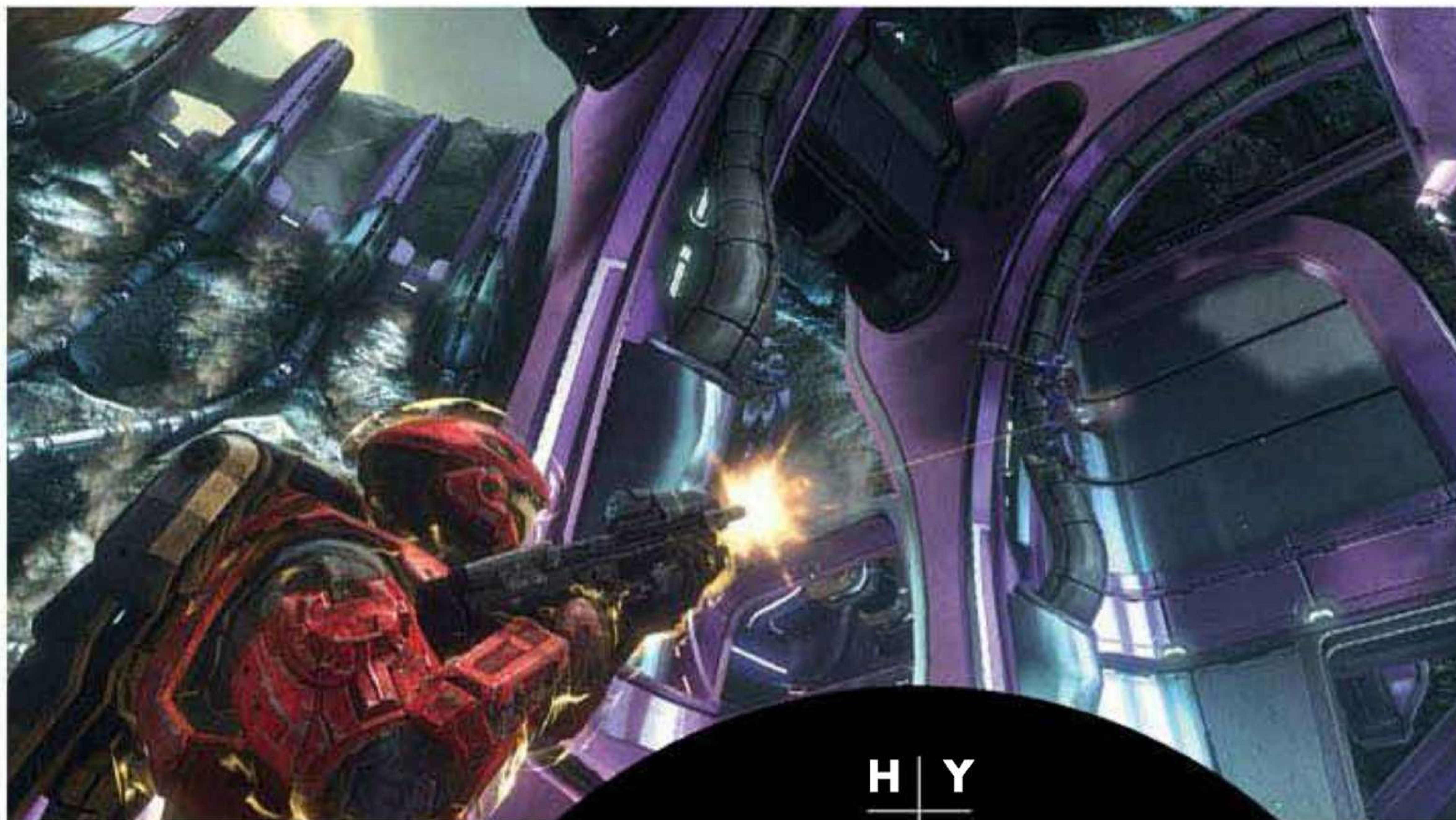
Order in the chaos

In addition to deathmatch, in which characters respawn after expiring and the aim of the game is to accrue as many points as possible within the time limit, Battle Royale mode offers a last-man-standing set of rules. Meanwhile, Cage Match crams combatants into a tiny arena, while Co-Op Survival fires *Robotron*-esque waves of enemies for players to take down in the now-popular Horde style. Perks unlock with repeat play across all of the multiplayer modes, with Platinum claiming that it can maintain the balance of the game despite the many available enhancements.

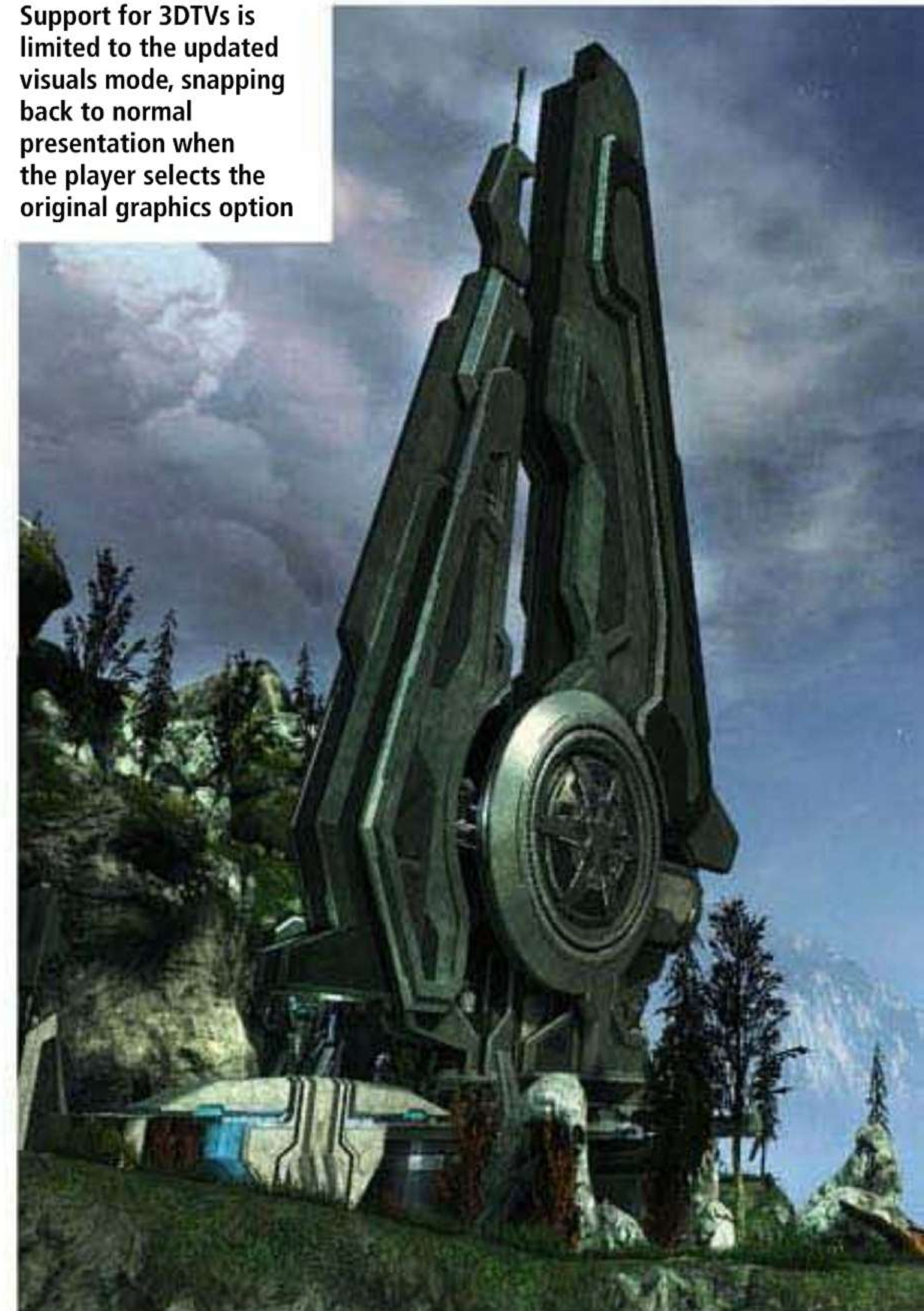
A multiplayer map for Horde-style play will join Damnation and Beaver Creek (known as Battle Creek in the original) alongside four as-yet-unseen multiplayer areas



Reach players will have the option to download the updated *Halo: Combat Evolved* maps, with full compatibility between multiplayer across games



Support for 3DTVs is limited to the updated visuals mode, snapping back to normal presentation when the player selects the original graphics option





HYPE

HALO
COMBAT EVOLVED ANNIVERSARY

343's Remaster Chief fights some familiar battles

Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	343 Industries
Format	360
Origin	US
Release	November 15



bit.ly/oj6fvE
Screenshot gallery

All-new Achievements will appease those who called for their inclusion in the release of the Xbox Classic version of the game. Kinect support has been confirmed, but no details are known yet

The overpowered pistol, the chattering sidekick, the labyrinthine Library, the Silent Cartographer. Few console launch titles have endured with such clarity, fondness and creative influence as the original Xbox's *Halo*. As such, a remastered revisit was inevitable, if not at this, its tenth anniversary, then no doubt at some other significant birthday in the future.

What was not, perhaps, was the level of care and attention the series' new steward 343 Industries has lavished upon it. With about 18 months of development time already invested, this represents far more than a nip and a tuck for this ageing Master Chief, instead offering another step in the evolution of *Combat Evolved*.

Entire environments have been repainted, the once murky marshlands of the Guilty Spark level now teeming with life and light in the demonstration we're given. Where clarity and navigation was previously an issue, now astute use of bloom and shade leads the player through the world, giving each area a fresh sense of place and character. A remastered soundtrack created in conjunction with Skywalker Sound brings Marty O'Donnell's compositions into sharper aural focus, while an injection of stereoscopic 3D gives those with the technology and disposition the opportunity to let the world of *Halo* envelop them more fully than it ever has before.

For all these back-of-the-box features, all that really matters to the game's devotees is that it plays identically to its forebear, and thankfully 343 has made this aim its primary target. To ensure there's no room for complaints, the developer has bolted two engines together to power the game: the original game's codebase overlaid with a new-look audiovisual engine, ensuring that once it's in players' hands the remake feels entirely faithful.

It's an ingenious solution that affords the game its strongest gimmick. Originally planned as a menu toggle option, now a single touch of a button allows the user to switch between the 2011 paint job and the 2001 original visuals. It's a feature first seen in *R-Type Dimensions* on Xbox Live Arcade, but rarely in a full-scale console release. The smooth then-and-now comparison offers a stark illustration of quite how far 3D games have journeyed over a decade, while demonstrating how sympathetic and in-character 343's work has been in retouching this masterpiece.

Other updates are more than skin deep. Achievements provide metagamers the motivation to dart through the game for a second time if nostalgia's pull isn't enough. Meanwhile, co-op over Xbox Live allows old hands to show newcomers (some of whom, as the representative from 343 explains somewhat wearily, will have been just five years old when the original came out) the ropes. Finally, hidden terminals have been introduced to the world, providing motion graphic info-reels that add backstory and hint towards the story of *Halo 4* for those who are as interested in the future of the series as its past.

With the game releasing on November 15, ten years to the day since the original launched alongside Microsoft's bulky console gambit, 343 Industries clearly views the project as a labour of love, a gift to the fans, with a relatively low price-point to match. For us, it's the chance to relive one of the formative console FPSes, a starting point for one of gaming's blockbuster series that, in so many ways, remains its highest point. ■



Reach for the stars

Best remembered for its standout environments and striking set-pieces, it's easy to overlook the original *Halo*'s multiplayer, which afforded some of the finest LAN parties in the console FPS canon. For this remake, the multiplayer portion of the game uses the *Halo: Reach* engine, complete with all of the jetpacks and other add-on tools introduced by that game. For purists, however, a 'classic' mode bans these additions from the original maps, even if the new physics and geometry remain. Meanwhile, discoverable skulls return, while a firefight mode provides the now mandatory waves of attackers for a team to unite against.

‘all the graphical grunt that modern games can muster’

Nuts

‘downright flashy’

gamesradar







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KILLSTREAK

How has Modern Warfare conquered the world, and where will it go from here?

The queue snakes away from the old aircraft hangars and up a dusty road, past clusters of nondescript buildings. On the other side of a hastily erected barrier, there are stewards throwing T-shirts into the crowds. The garments are snatched at enthusiastically and almost torn apart by dozens of cargo-shorts-clad youths. The sun beats down remorselessly. It's almost 10am. Opening time.

This is **Call Of Duty** XP, Activision's $150-a-head thank-you to the game's gigantic fanbase. Within the sprawling Hercules campus, where Howard Hughes built his Spruce Goose aircraft, there is a full recreation of the Scrapyard level from *COD4*, now reimagined as a paintball venue. There is a Jeep experience in which a stunt driver flings visitors around a course before they're bullied out of their vehicles and dragged through a building by real-life Navy SEALs. Inside the two vast hangars are thousands of demo units running *Modern Warfare 3*. For two days, the site throngs with an estimated 6,000 people. They get their faces painted like Ghost, they watch the million-dollar professional gaming tournament; they buy *Call Of Duty* gear and eat at a reproduction of *Modern Warfare 2*'s Burger Town restaurant. There are queues everywhere, all the time.

But what are all these people doing here? What is it about *Call Of Duty*? What has allowed the game to cross over into a mainstream phenomenon, complete with its own festival?



When we sit down with the producer of *Modern Warfare 3*, **Mark Rubin**, who has been at Infinity Ward since *COD2*, he can only shrug. "I'll tell you this: the success has been a huge surprise to us. There are 30 million people playing a game that costs 60 bucks. The numbers show that at any time, over half the people playing on consoles are playing a *Call Of Duty* title. There's nothing else like it. How we deal with that massive playerbase is a major issue. There are so many voices, so many different opinions. It has been and is continually overwhelming."

Eric Hirshberg, the CEO of Activision Publishing and an ex-ad man, is more willing to tackle the question. He has developed what he calls the four columns of *Call Of Duty* to explain its popularity. For him it's about the sense of 'epic realism', the endless adrenaline rush, the fact that the game is easy to pick up yet hard to master, and its adherence to fluid 60fps visuals. "It's that sense of being right on the line between authenticity and the elevated kickass experience of an action movie," he explains, adding: "That's a difficult balance to strike; it's hard to make something that feels real *and* fantastical. More than any other game, I end a session of *Call Of Duty* with every muscle tensed – that's the signature, that's what these teams know how to do better than anyone."

Clearly, the fundamental element of the singleplayer campaign is the sense of managed chaos. The *Call Of Duty* titles are based around cacophonous set-pieces, but they are battles through which the participant is clearly guided (usually by an indestructible NPC). It is almost impossible to get lost in a *Call Of Duty* level, but there is always a sense of activity going on around the protagonist, and this ramps up the pressure and excitement. It is a beguiling recipe to the 'casual' gamer intimidated by open worlds, who just wants to power through an explosive narrative, but those who dismiss the titles as barely interactive are being overly glib. Like the voting system in The X Factor, skewed and manipulated by the depiction of each contestant's 'emotional journey', *Call Of Duty* is a populist masterpiece of choreographed user-intervention. The player is the puppet, not the master.

While this has always been the case with the brand, the tipping point from reasonable success toward industry domination was almost certainly the multiplayer mode in *COD4*. For this title, Infinity Ward looked outside the FPS genre for inspiration. The character progression system borrowed heavily from the RPG sector, allowing players to rank up, unlock new kit and define character classes. Vitally, it gave novices a reason to stick with the mode even when better players continually destroyed them. For the perks system, meanwhile, Rubin says the team looked toward *Street Fighter*'s ultra-satisfying power gauge setup, in which the player builds toward accessing a special move by landing successive blows. Perks work in just the same way.



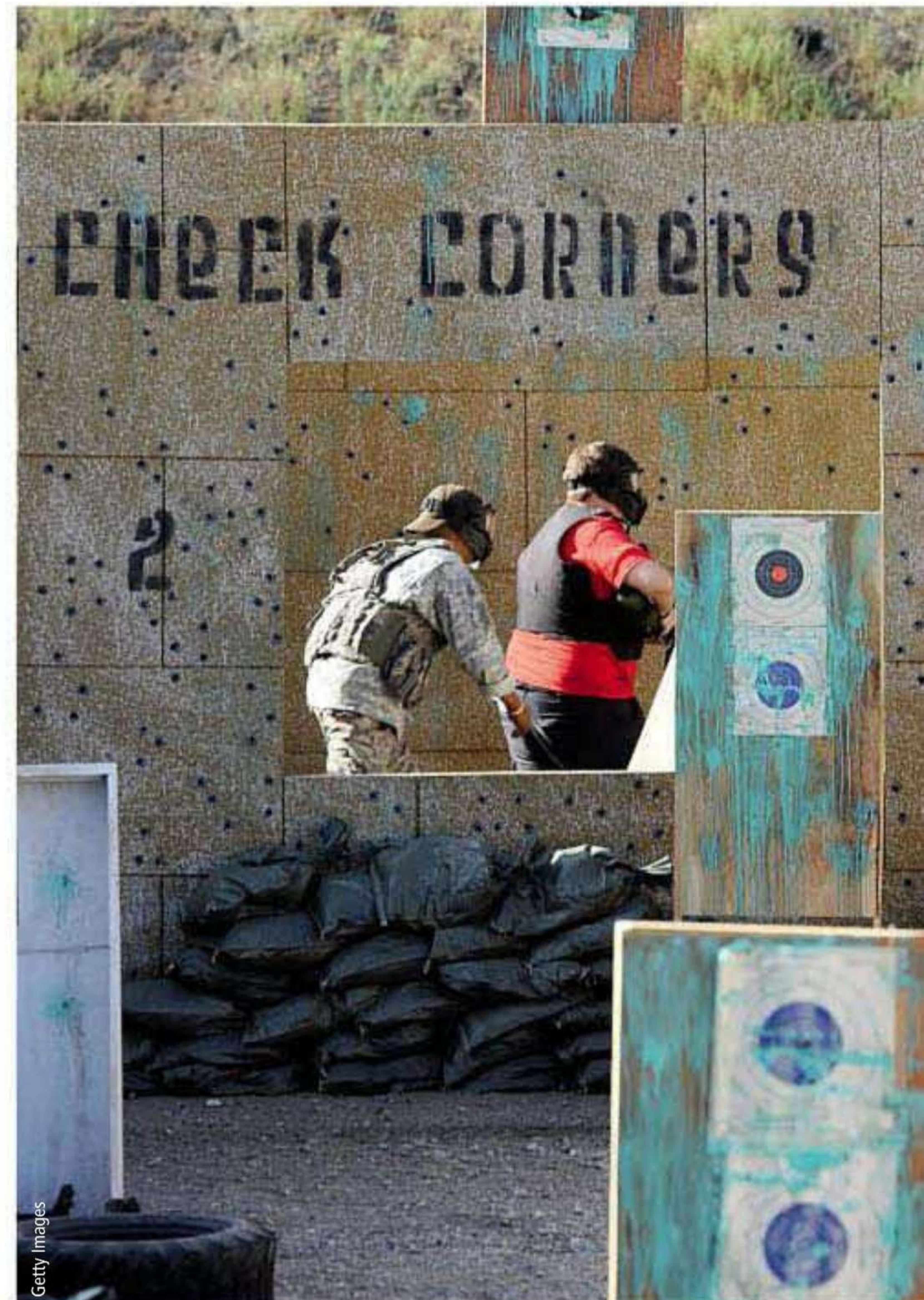


ABOVE **Mark Rubin, producer, *MW3***
TOP **Eric Hirshberg, CEO, Activision Publishing**
RIGHT **This life-size version of *COD4*'s Scrapyard map was a paintball arena. Teams of five competed in Capture the Flag and Domination-style bouts. Unsurprisingly, the most successful sides were drawn from the several US marine and army divisions present at the show**

And this was all happening at the right time. Through 2007 and 2008, console Internet functionality was improving, broadband speeds were accelerating and a wider demographic was being drawn to interactive entertainment. Suddenly, online gaming services had become social venues, and *Call Of Duty* was there to take advantage. "There's a snowball effect," Hirshberg says. "At a certain point, the size and engagement of your community becomes a competitive advantage, because players can always get in a game – your friends are all there; there are always people at your skill level. In multiplayer, you want to be in the game where the rest of the world is. Scale matters."



So when *Modern* *Warfare 2* hit, it had incredible momentum behind it. The game sold over 20 million copies, becoming the biggest entertainment launch of 2009. A year later, however, the feat was bettered by Treyarch's *Black Ops*. Backed by a multimillion-





Getty Images

LEFT **Activision reckons that around 6000 fans attended COD XP. On the first morning, Infinity Ward's Robert Bowling hosted a session showing the latest trailers of the game. Yes, there was whooping**
BELOW **The vast XP arena was dotted with briefing tents for the many activities. There were also panel discussions with pro-gamers and members of the *Modern Warfare 3* development team. The result was a sort of mini-Comic Con for *COD* heads**

"There are days when you think: 'Holy shit, this is a monster'. There is a lot of stress. It makes you work hard"

dollar marketing blitz, which included a 60-second commercial aired during the Super Bowl, the game shifted over five million copies on day one, netting $360 million in revenue. In the movie world, James Cameron's record-shattering Avatar took one week to make $232.2m. Sales of *Black Ops* now stand at over 25 million units. Those millions of *Call Of Duty* players have now logged over 2.3 billion hours of play – a quarter of a million years.



Getty Images

This is why so many people are here at the XP event – in some ways *Call Of Duty* has transcended the FPS genre, the game industry even. "There's something I refer to as pop cultural inevitability," Hirshberg says. "A lot of non-science-fiction fans saw Avatar, and that was a straight-up sci-fi movie – but it had a cultural gravitas that made people think: 'I've got to check this out, I've got to be a part of it'. I feel that *Call Of Duty* has that effect". Sure, BlizzCon is huge, and *Runescape* has its own annual event, but these are games built around a persistent community and intense group activity. *Call Of Duty* is based around shooting people. Yet here we are, with hundreds of fans milling about.

Can *Modern Warfare 3* really build on that? It certainly didn't have the best of starts. Last March, Infinity Ward co-founders Jason West and Vince Zampella were sacked, accused by Activision of insubordination. The pair has sued the publisher for breach of contract, with Activision quickly counter-suing. Unless a settlement can be reached, the two parties are rumbling toward a protracted court case set to to start in May next year.

More damaging in the short term was the fact that dozens of senior studio staff followed the duo to their new home, Respawn Entertainment. "It was an extremely turbulent















18 million

The number of *Black Ops* map packs sold. This means that, on average, each player has spent an extra $18 on the game, above the retail price. Activision-Blizzard's second-quarter 2011 financial results showed that 37 per cent of its $1.14 billion in revenues was generated by digital products

46

Reportedly the number of staff that left Infinity Ward in the wake of the Jason West and Vince Zampella departures in 2010. The studio retained barely half of its development workforce. It is now back up to 94 employees

28.9 per cent

The amount of players who bought the 360 version of *Modern Warfare* but failed to complete the first level, according to stats released in 2009 by Infinity Ward's Robert Bowling. Conversely, 46.5 per cent of owners completed the entire game. Only 2.8 per cent of Xbox players completed Mile High Club on Veteran

1/4

The proportion of UK homes containing a copy of a *Call Of Duty* title, according to Infinity Ward producer Mark Rubin. According to certain estimates, one in eight American homes contains a copy of *Black Ops* alone

11 million

The number of *Modern Warfare 2* achievements unlocked within 24 hours of the game's release. A total of 5.2 million multiplayer hours were also logged in that opening day by 2.2 million unique players

1 billion dollars

The total made by *Black Ops* after six weeks on sale. "Only *Call Of Duty* and Avatar have ever achieved the billion-dollar revenue milestone this quickly," Activision CEO Bobby Kotick beamed at the time. In its first three months, 1.1 trillion shots were fired online in *Black Ops*



Glen Schofield and Michael Condrey, founders, Sledgehammer Games RIGHT This dramatic raid on Manhattan island featured heavily in Activision's E3 demo and will appear on day two of the *Modern Warfare 3* campaign

time," Rubin says. "There was a lot of stuff going on. Everybody was trying to figure out what was best for them... But some people didn't want to leave *Call Of Duty* – I mean, we have some of the first ever Infinity Ward employees still here. They've put so much work into this game that they didn't want to leave. There were 40 people [who were] still passionate about the series, and we had staff left in every department. We didn't lose any entire sections.

"So when we were looking at what we could do with this reduced team, it was a matter of, well, we can make a game, but we don't have enough people to do it in the timeframe required. We didn't want to just hire in a whole bunch of people and risk lowering our quality bar. So I went to talk to Sledgehammer, got a sense of their passion for games and development, and started working on getting them as a co-developer."



Meanwhile, over the newly formed Sledgehammer studio, founded by EA veterans **Glen Schofield** and **Michael Condrey**, the team were working on a *Call Of Duty* action-adventure title. When approached to help with *Modern Warfare 3*, the duo polled their staff and found that a majority supported a move on to the *Modern Warfare* brand. The deal was done.

"We were very confident after *Dead Space*, especially with our development processes," says Schofield. "We knew we could deliver within a deadline and with a lot of polish. And that confidence was exactly what was needed. But there are days when you think: 'Holy shit, this is a monster'. There is a lot of stress. It's not crippling, but the thing that worries me most is people going: 'Look, there's the guy who brought down *Call of Duty*!' That scares the crap out of me. It makes you work really hard."

Strangely, what could come out of this troubled development schedule is the most cogent *Call Of Duty* title since the first *Modern Warfare*. The campaign mode takes place straight after *MW2* and is likely to continue the same structure, with the small-scale personal conflict between Taskforce 141 and ultranationalist terror chief Vladimir Makarov placed within the wider context of a Russo-American war. Here, though, the conflict has widened, swallowing up western Europe and leading to set-piece battles in London, Paris and an as-yet-unannounced German city.

Does this mean an even more convoluted narrative than its predecessor? Rubin promises not. "*Modern Warfare 1* had a great story – it was simplistic," he says. "With *MW2*, we went a little too complicated, we tried

to have too many twists and turns. We've realised that, in a two-hour movie that's fine, but in a six-hour game, when you maybe don't play the whole thing at once, a complicated story is harder to manage from the player's perspective. With this one, we focused on a few key story elements, which have interesting loop backs to other titles, but they're never the main focus. You can just follow the single primary thread and still get a good story."



Meanwhile, the guiding concept behind the multiplayer mode is balance. While the series has so far been skewed toward kill/death ratios, *MW3* seeks to encourage a more tactical, team-based approach. The defining element is likely to be the splitting of streak rewards into three strike packages, selectable at the outset of each bout. The Assault pack provides a conventionally aggressive mix of rewards such as an assault drone and at 15 kills a massively armoured Juggernaut suit. The Support pack, however, recognises players not just for kills but for providing assists and meeting objectives like capturing flags. The specific rewards then emphasise this team-oriented approach, providing the likes of ballistic vest handouts for the team and recon drones. Crucially, reward streaks aren't cancelled out when the player is killed, providing more of an incentive to take this ostensibly less exciting approach. A third Specialist pack unlocks additional perks after successive kills, and is meant for skilled lone operatives.

In the matches we play during the event, this already seems to be facilitating a more structured gameplay experience, with more objective-focused participants working at the edges of each bout, chipping in with easier kills and providing almost constant UAV operation. The map design feels varied enough to support multiple approaches. The London-based Underground, set within the fictitious Middleton station, features open city streets but also winding staircases leading down to an exploded Tube line overlooked by exit walkways. The Paris map is a mass of backstreets and squares, while Village is a rat-run of narrow mud roads between decrepit huts. There are opportunities for all kinds of players, and the revised 40-weapon roster promises greater distinction between types – no more dominant do-it-all stars like the SCAR or UMP.

The levels are apparently designed to encourage movement rather than caution, and this is doubly obvious with Kill Confirm, the new team-based mode. Here, players must grab the dog tags left by felled enemies in order to collect the points – if an enemy gets to the tags first, the kill is cancelled. It's similar to the Headhunter mode in *Halo: Reach*, but while that was every man for himself, Kill Confirm is a team game and this adds an intriguing dynamic. Each match quickly turns into a sort of mobile gang fight with groups of players stalking the map, chucking frag and concussion grenades in their path. And every dog tag is a potential ambush, so providing covering fire is a must.

It's exciting stuff, and it harks back to one of the defining qualities of the series – its sheer speed and fluidity. Infinity Ward has never really made a big deal of the game's central technology, which began life as a modified Quake 3 Engine, before countless iterations and rewrites. It's now referred to internally as the IW5 engine, but Ruben says his team is not interested in whizzy new lighting or shader effects: "Gameplay rules everything because that's what we're selling – we're not

The Infinity Ward engine, now on its fifth iteration, has been re-written and extended for *Modern Warfare 3*. In theory, the result is more detailed maps and levels, and plentiful explosive air support, without a hit on the 60fps framerate



Setting the game in cities provided both design and technical challenges for the dev teams. Multiplayer levels need greater verticality without turning them into sniper havens, while the framerate was hit by the dense urban clutter



Chacko Sonny, head of studio, Beachhead Studios



bit.ly/killstreak
All our coverage of *Modern Warfare 3*

selling tech. Everything we do to the engine is driven by design requirements."

Speed is the aim, and speed is the result. *Modern Warfare 3* zips along in multiplayer, the weapons proving enthusiastically responsive, the animations slick and convincing. During the excellent Survival mode, *MW3*'s answer to Horde, we see members of an African militia force run into the scene, then skid convincingly to a halt, sending dust flying; enemies leap over objects, stumble, and crawl across the ground when wounded; everything moves, everything changes, at an accelerated rate. *Battlefield* may be winning plaudits for its hi-tech ANT animation system, but *MW3* is not far behind. "It feels so fast-paced compared to other games," agrees **Mike Gaetano**, the captain of Team Obey, one of the competitors in the XP pro-gaming tournament. "We've been competing in *COD* for years, but when we're playing Team Deathmatch, we still get that adrenaline rush. The matches are always so close. It blows my mind."

Despite the greater pace, we find that we're living longer than we did in *Black Ops* and *Modern Warfare 2*. This, it turns out, was the aim. Rubin recognised that when his team increased the verticality of the maps in *MW2* it meant players were having to continually check all around them to spot enemies and could easily be ambushed: "We wanted to retain those multiple engagements, but we didn't want you to be continually under fire as you were in that game. We wanted a good flow – that's something *Call Of Duty 4* did really well: I think Crash is still considered to be one of the best maps of any FPS. So our designers went right back to the old maps and asked: what is it about the flow of these that makes them interesting?"

Another key addition is the concept of weapon XP. Instead of the currency system from *Black Ops*, players earn experience with well-used guns, opening up selectable weapon proficiencies – these can be used to reduce kick and recoil when a weapon fires, or the flinch response when you're hit by enemy bullets. It's another tactical element: in smaller, more intense maps, eliminating flinch will be vital, while in larger environments, with more time to select targets, players may well opt for the 'hold breath' proficiency which transfers the standard sniper rifle feature to assault weapons. It's a neat system that, again, draws on the world of RPGs.

The final piece in the *MW3* jigsaw is Elite, the online community service created by Beachhead Studios that makes it easier for friends to meet, play and compare stats and leaderboard positions. Paying subscribers also get access to prize competitions, all of the downloadable content (including exclusive elements such as new game modes), a *COD* digital TV channel, and expert guides to maps and weapons. According to studio head **Chacko Sonny**, the origins of the service were low-key. "It started two years ago, really as a skunkworks project within the studios themselves," he explains. "They saw that they had a huge community that continued to play older titles even as the franchise pushed on; they wanted to bring continuity between the games for those people. But then we started to think about how we could innovate in other dimensions, whether that was social or competitive. It became clear that it would need a studio organisation to deliver that capability."

Beachhead was subsequently formed in 2010, and work on the Elite project began in earnest. Its combination of digital community, DLC distribution and TV services required a specialist workforce. "We're something completely new," Sonny says. "My director of technology comes from Google, so he's dealt with large-scale online

featuresets, I've got guys in operations from Expedia, who have worked on massive server deployments; I have people in the design department who have Web and agency backgrounds. It really is this crazy cross-functional organisation."



Industry analyst Michael Pachter predicts that the premium Elite service will attract two million subscribers in its first year. He also suggests that Activision will eventually add a *Diablo III*-style auction house, where players will be able to sell hard-won weapons and items for real cash, with Activision getting a cut via listings fees. Sonny won't comment on this, but says new features will inevitably arrive. "We've built the service in a modular fashion – we can add parts to the site and the service. The plan post-release is to continue to iterate and we've already had discussions with studios about subsequent *Call Of Duty* projects, and features they can leverage greater levels of integration with."

As for the future, the looming question is: how far can *Call Of Duty* go? Is 30 million the ceiling? Certainly preorders for *MW3* are strong, with retail chains Game and GameStop both claiming that figures are on track to beat *Black Ops*. But Activision isn't making any rash predictions. "We're in uncharted waters," Hirshberg says. "*Black Ops* has sold more copies than any other game ever. There's no proof that there are more people out there. That said, the installed base of HD consoles has grown at a record pace – there's a larger audience for us to market to. Where the ceiling is, I don't know, but we haven't reached it yet. By every measurable standard this is still a franchise on the rise. The titles are each selling better, people are spending more minutes per day playing, YouTube channel subscribers, Facebook likes… everywhere you look to measure for weakness or decay, you can't find it – you can only find growth. We're not going to take that for granted, but we have good reason to continually invest in the franchise."

Hirshberg's references to social networking sites are telling. Back in December, when Activision CEO Bobby Kotick talked to CNN about *Call of Duty*, he also compared the game to Twitter and Facebook as a place for friends to meet rather than merely play a game. This is where Elite's importance lies, not as a moneymaking platform for DLC, but as a socialising service. Through the built-in Facebook support, Elite users can see when all their online friends are playing, broadening the reach and influence of the game, as well as providing a wider pool of teammates and competitors.

Beachhead has also learned from Facebook and from the concepts behind social networks. "Before I even arrived on the project the team had gotten a social psychologist to come in and explain to us how different types of social groups aggregate online and how they create structures," Sonny explains. "So we have our Groups feature, which is loose social affiliations focused around interests, whether that's your school, favourite band or whatever, and then there's our clan support which is more focused, competition-orientated grouping." Add in the forthcoming mobile apps, which will let players formulate loadouts and view game stats on the go, and *COD* is set to become a pervasive medium.

Rubin, meanwhile, is confident the brand will prosper by continually innovating. "Annual development *can* continue," he insists. "Every year we try to make the game that people want to play at that time. And *Call Of Duty* is a brand under which multiple titles can exist. Who's to say a WWII title won't get made again? Or perhaps there'll be a futuristic game. They can still exist in the *Call Of Duty* universe, because the name represents a gameplay style, not a timeframe. I don't even know if we'll be doing a *Modern Warfare 4*, we haven't discussed it yet. Maybe we'll do a new sub-IP. I have no idea.

"But we as a studio want to push some boundaries, we want to introduce new stuff to the players. Spec Ops gives us the arena to try some cool new ideas, and we may be able to move some of those out of that arena and make them a bigger part of the game – or even take it over. Maybe people will move away from singleplayer stories toward a more persistent co-op world or an MMOG. I don't know, I'm just speculating. There are a lot of directions we can go."

The shadow on the horizon is *Battlefield 3* (see preview on p62). EA's challenger is picking up plenty of support in the shooter community – with good reason. It will surely have a greater impact on the market than *Medal Of Honor* did a year ago. It could even ensure that *MW3* fails to beat its record-breaking predecessor. But the Activision teams – no doubt well drilled and media trained – just won't engage with the discussion. A question about the rival title is batted away by Rubin during an XP press conference. "I won't speculate on other titles," he mutters.

Meanwhile, outside the media room, hundreds of fans trundle by, their bags stuffed with posters and mementoes. Here is a game with its own festival that its fans have paid $150 to attend. Later, Kanye West is playing on stage, and there will be dozens of celebrities in the audience. And afterwards, another multimillion-dollar advertising splurge. Activision cannot force 40 million people to buy its next game, but it sure as hell can make certain that we all notice it. ■

"Who's to say another WWII COD won't get made? Or perhaps a futuristic game. They can exist in this universe"

ARMY OPS

Activision is keen to point out that all the proceeds of XP were going toward its Call Of Duty Endowment, a charity set up to help military personnel readapt to civilian life. Also at the event was Pro vs GI Joe, organiser of online games between soldiers overseas and pro gamers and athletes.

The members of the armed forces milling around at the event, though by their very presence here certainly not representative of objective option, certainly seem to endorse the game. "*Call Of Duty* is the one that everyone in the military knows," says Sergeant Roesch of the LA Recruiting Battalion. "In Iraq, I was playing *MW2* during my off time, We have shops where we can buy games. I love it because it's realistic. It's not like *Halo*, where it's all futuristic weird-ass weapons. I can relate to this because I use these weapons. I know what the weapons are capable of. I do this in a realtime environment."

We ask if there are any inaccuracies that anger him. "Sometimes I get a little irritated with the perks because I *know* what a frag grenade can do – if it doesn't kill somebody because they have the Flak Jacket perk, I'm like, *really*? And if you fire an RPG at someone, it doesn't matter what armour they wear." When asked about the morality of war games, and whether it's right to depict realistic military action for entertainment, he merely shrugs wearily. "I don't have a problem with it. You just get past that. It's a lot of fun."

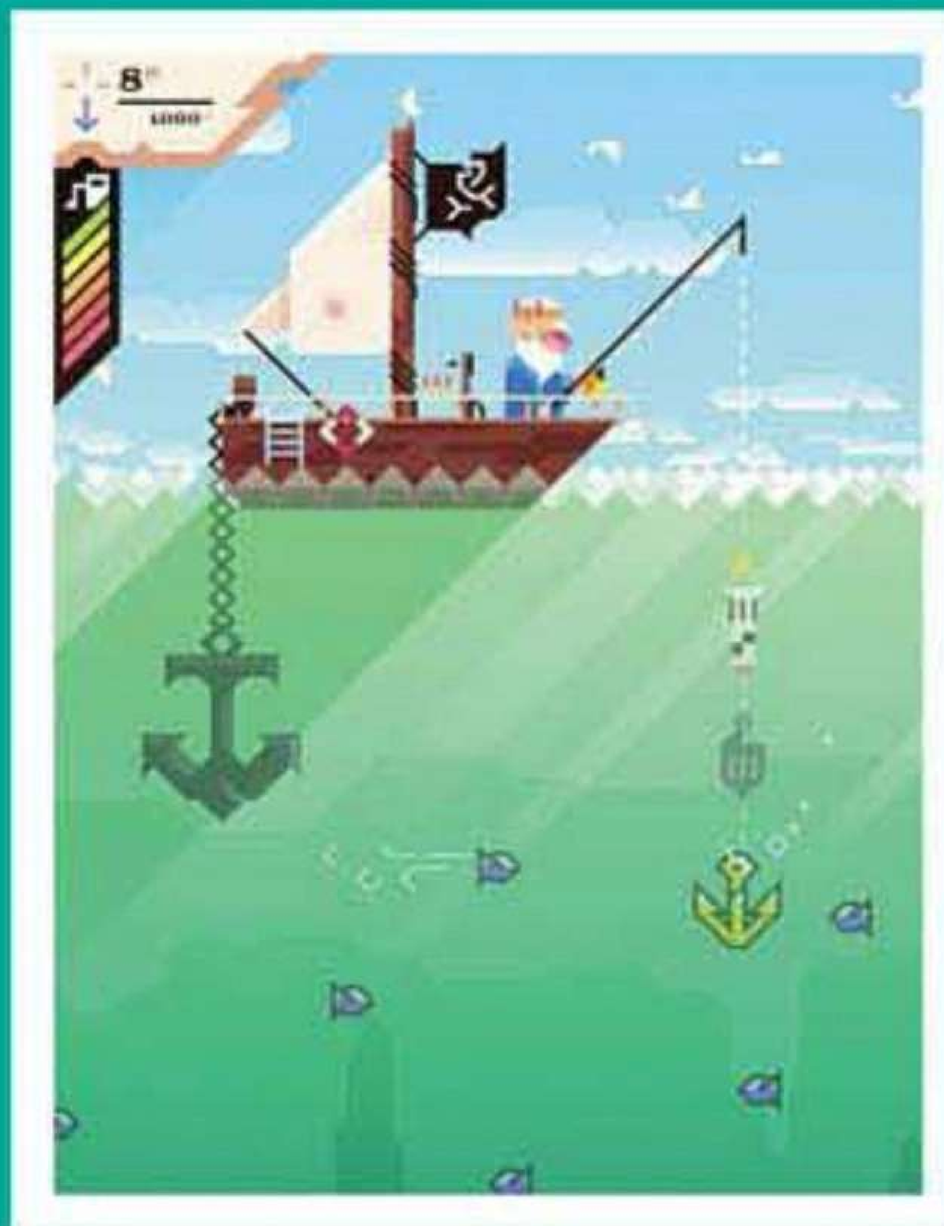
ATTACK OF THE CLONES

Is lifting another developer's ideas a creative scourge, or merely a natural evolutionary process?

CLONES

When Dutch indie game developer Vlambeer's *Radical Fishing* hit web browsers in late 2010, its original and absurd gameplay made it an instant viral success. Players take the role of a gun-toting fisherman who, rather than try to catch a single fish, must first avoid fish by steering his hook as it sinks through the water. As soon as your available length of fishing line runs out (or you inadvertently hit a fish), the line starts reeling back in, at which time you must snag as many fish as possible on the hook's return to the surface. The accumulated fish are then flung high into the air to be blasted to smithereens. Players earn money from the splattered fish, which can be spent on a variety of upgrades such as a longer fishing line, better weapons, or a suit and tie that allows the player to sell future catches at a higher price.

It's a perfect balance of simple controls, distilled mechanics and prolonged payoff. The three-act structure of each cast keeps the gameplay verbs – avoid, collect, kill – distinct, so that even the most casual players have no trouble understanding what is expected of them. Coupled with *Radical Fishing*'s extensive upgrade system and the constant thirst of players to explore further into the watery depths, it's all too easy to spend hours playing *Radical Fishing* 'just one more time'.



Ridiculous Fishing is Vlambeer's iOS follow-up to its original browser-based hit game *Radical Fishing*

Since going live a year ago, *Radical Fishing* has been played over a million times on the game portal Bored.com and just as many times cumulatively across other online game portals. It was clear to the developers at Vlambeer that they had landed something big: an original concept that now had proven appeal and an enthusiastic fanbase. The studio teamed up with Zach Gage (designer of iOS games including *Bit Pilot* and *Halcyon*) and Greg Wohlwend (artist for iOS hit *Solipskier*) and began work on an iOS follow-up to *Radical Fishing* called *Ridiculous Fishing*, hoping to polish the game's mechanics and visual style into a worthy commercial release.

But then, still months out from *Ridiculous Fishing*'s release, a trailer for a new iOS game by a developer called Gamenauts appeared. The game was called *Ninja Fishing*, and the similarities between it and *Radical Fishing* were unmistakable. Players control a ninja fisherman who must cast his hook as deep as possible before pulling as many fish as possible to the surface where he flings them into the air and chops them into sashimi with a swipe of the player's finger. The gold coins received from chopping the fish are spent on upgrades almost identical in functionality to those of *Radical Fishing*. The visuals were different, but there was no mistaking what had happened: Gamenauts had cloned Vlambeer's concept and was going to get it to the App Store first.

"We were pretty unpleasantly surprised," says Vlambeer's **Rami Ismail**, with herniating understatement. *Ninja Fishing* was slated to launch a week after the trailer's release. Gamenauts (who didn't respond to our requests for comment) reportedly contacted Vlambeer after it was called out. "They offered us credits and stressed they had always intended to credit us for being their inspiration," says Ismail. "However, the credits didn't make it to the first version they submitted to the App Store, so we'd have to wait for the first title update."

This wasn't good enough for Vlambeer, as it didn't want to be associated with the clone. "We didn't want to implicitly agree with the practice of copying a game so closely that the gameplay, the theme, and even the upgrades are all but identical," Ismail explains. "We then asked them to, instead of offering us credits, differentiate their game from ours. Maybe have a different theme and figure out new mechanics. Add or remove something instead of keeping the 'avoid, collect, kill' gameplay with the exact same thematics."

Gamenauts refused, and a week later *Ninja Fishing* launched. It jumped straight to the number five spot on the paid app chart, as well as the top of the adventure game charts in the US, UK and Canada. However, more painful for Vlambeer than *Ninja Fishing*'s commercial success was its critical one. It reviewed well, sitting at a Metacritic score of 80 at the time of writing. On Vlambeer's blog, Ismail states that: "The worst thing is reading positive reviews complimenting the super-original design of the fishing gameplay – by people who have no clue that we even exist."

It's easy to label Gamenauts the villain of this particular story, and many columns, on a variety of

Web sites, have already done just that. However, **Chris Bateman** – game designer, philosopher and author of books including the upcoming Imaginary Games – is careful to note that no clear distinction between imitation and inspiration exists. "It's natural to talk about 'drawing the line' when it comes to distinguishing between fair use and theft of ideas, but it's important to recognise that there's more than one line to be drawn. There's no agreement about what's acceptable and what isn't when it comes to inspiration and copying ideas, and I'm highly doubtful any kind of consensus could be attained."

Gameplay cloning such as the case of *Radical Fishing* and *Ninja Fishing* is hardly a new phenomena, and the moral and legal grey area between 'inspiration' and 'copying' has been contested for as long as the medium of videogames has existed. Game designers have long relied on the reiteration of preexisting concepts and ideas in the shaping of new titles. "Even back in the arcades of the 1970s and '80s the line was blurred between duplication and creative design," says Bateman. "Namco's *Galaxian* certainly copied Taito's *Space Invaders*, but it's a much better game in my opinion. And what about Midway's *Gorf*, which copies both *Galaxian* and *Space Invaders* almost exactly in two of its stages, but throws in some original content as well?"



However, Vlambeer were pipped to the post by Gamenaut's *Radical Fishing* 'homage', *Ninja Fishing*

Looking back further, *Pong* merely built on and refined the concept of *Tennis For Two* (which is indebted itself to actual tennis). More recently, the swathes of firstperson shooters in the decades since id Software found success with *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* still work on very similar, fundamental mechanics, even if the audiovisual assets have changed dramatically.

Reiteration and refinement, when mixed with just the right balance of new concepts, have led to the emergence of many acclaimed games. Valve could never have made *Portal* without the well-trodden design of firstperson shooters or the concepts of *Narbacular Drop*. Media Molecule's *LittleBigPlanet* couldn't exist without the sidescrolling genre conventions laid down by *Super Mario Bros*. Re-Logic's *Terraria* is indebted to Mojang's *Minecraft* even while it adds a vast array of original ideas. "Would we really want to be in a situation where only id Software, say, could make a firstperson shooter? Or only Nintendo could make a platform game?" Bateman challenges.

These examples all arguably add as much to the formulae as they borrow. Perhaps more deserving of the label 'clones', then, are the lower-budget games that are practically identical both mechanically and stylistically to bigger titles on more expensive platforms. Such titles have always existed, too, hoping to tap an audience that has the desire but not the means to play the triple-A titles. The Commodore 64 game *Ramparts*, for instance, took Midway's arcade hit *Rampage* and simply replaced the giant monsters and skyscrapers with huge knights and medieval castles. Throughout the '90s, stores had a wide selection of portable 'brick games' which were *Tetris* clones, targeting an audience that couldn't afford Nintendo's Game Boy. More recently, developer Gameloft has become notorious for its iOS games that are clearly clones of blockbuster console games, such as a modern warfare FPS called *Modern Combat 2*; a thirdperson adventure game into uncharted lands called *Shadow Guardian*; and a sci-fi RTS featuring savage beasts, burly space marines and futuristic aliens called *Starfront*.

In all these cases, the aim of the developers is to recreate an experience the audience already desires, and they must do so from the ground up with new visuals, audio and code if they are to avoid breaking copyright laws (see 'Copyright and Wrong'). Bateman has been vocal (though out-voiced) about the need to respect 'game duplicators' as game designers in their own right. "As much as game duplicators still solve game design problems and coordinate the design of a game in production, they are still working as game designers," he insists. "I think part of the problem is that 'game designer' has an aura of creativity about it. There's certainly a lot less creativity in game duplication than there is in designing original products, but that doesn't mean the job is any easier or requires less skill or commitment."

These historical cases all have one thing in common: the games being duplicated were all commercially successful prior to the emergence of their clones. For a game-literate audience, there would have been little confusion where the cloned games were lifting ideas from, and usually the clone wouldn't have been mistakenly chosen for the original, but because the

original was unavailable for that customer – much like Gameloft's games appeal to those without home consoles. However, in the current landscape of the videogame industry, it's now often the lesser-known independent developers such as Vlambeer who are conceiving the new, original game-types.

"The commercial games industry is starved of innovation, because when you're running a company you need to make money or you have to fire staff. That makes commercial developers and publishers risk averse," explains Bateman. On the other hand, indie developers are more willing – perhaps even required – to take risks and experiment with original concepts to stand out in a crowded marketplace. "That means commercial developers will always raid indies for ideas, and if you put your game out as a free browser version and it's a great idea, there's a chance someone will copy it."

The heightened risk for indie developers is that those doing the cloning are perhaps able to reach a far broader audience and are lauded as the originals, while the true innovators are forgotten. Unlike bigger titles, they don't have the fame or the bank balances of preexisting commercial successes to hold them up – just a tight community of avid, passionate and vocal fans.



Rovio's *Angry Birds* isn't as original as most people think, using the gameplay from Armor Games' *Crush The Castle* and adding birds

It was such fans that first brought *Ninja Fishing*'s existence to Vlambeer's attention. "The way we learned about *Ninja Fishing* was when our Twitter account went haywire with people tweeting us about [*Ninja Fishing*'s] trailer," says Ismail.

Word spread across social networks and, soon enough, every positive review of *Ninja Fishing* posted was flooded with a comment thread decrying its lifting of *Radical Fishing*'s gameplay. Its average score on Metacritic might be 80 with praises of originality, but its user score sits at an abysmal 2.5, with Vlambeer fans marking it a zero and claiming plagiarism.

But among these comments are others that show a different side of the story. "If it wasn't for *Ninja Fishing*, I never would have heard of *Ridiculous Fishing*," says one. "I love *Ninja Fishing*, so I'll be sure to check that one out, too."

Bateman suggests that while indie developers have to accept their original ideas are always at risk of duplication, they also need to embrace the reactions of their own fans. "If Vlambeer hadn't embraced the angry backlash they'd have missed out on the incredible marketing opportunity that just landed in their lap! How many more people are going to buy *Ridiculous Fishing* thanks to the publicity this has generated?"

Ismail is optimistic that Gamenauts beating them to the App Store won't damage their sales too much. "We expect that Gamenauts approaches a different market segment." However, he concedes that the not-insignificant group of consumers that buy whatever is in the top ten list "are probably less inclined to buy a fishing game so similar to a game they already own."

But it's not a concern with sales that has Vlambeer most upset, but rather the thought that players might consider Vlambeer the clones and Gamenauts the original creators. "We're miffed that Gamenauts is taking the credit," Ismail admits. In this respect, Bateman agrees: "There's no risk involved in admitting who inspired you, and it's very disrespectful not to be honest about these things."

Yet, Bateman is more optimistic about how the saga might ultimately play out: "I feel for Vlambeer because Gamenauts has stolen their thunder. However, I also feel that I would love for one of my games to have influenced someone else's design, because to influence future games is to become a part of the history of games. If extreme fishing emerges as a new genre after all this, Vlambeer is going to be famous for founding it – and perversely, Gamenauts will have been directly responsible for that fame."

For its part, Vlambeer seem to be coming around to this same mentality. When asked what they got from the experience, Ismail quoted an article from **Edge Online** (bit.ly/nYiz4f): "When you have no originality in your games, you have no history, and you can have no personal quirks. You'll end up with customers, perhaps, but not genuine fans – and games built around the concept of customers alone are often pretty miserable."

Gamenauts has certainly mustered plenty of customers with *Ninja Fishing*'s wholesale adaptation of *Radical Fishing*'s core concepts, but Vlambeer has realised just how many fans it has. And that's something only originality can buy. ■

COPYRIGHT AND WRONG



Game cloning is not just a question of morals, but one of legality. What can and can't be legally copied from another game? **Cam Rogers** – a Screen Industries lawyer, film and animation producer, and board secretary for Australia's Freeplay Independent Games Festival – clarifies a few points.

If a developer were to copy another developer's audiovisual assets and use them in their own game, they would be in a lot of trouble, but it seems the same is not the case if they were to copy gameplay mechanics. Why is this?

Copyright is the protection of the expression of an idea. It is not the protection of the idea itself. For there to be an infringement of copyright, you must establish that something has actually been copied (in other words, plagiarised). In videogames it's the code, the artwork, and the music that's the expression of the idea. If a game were to copy another game's code, or to utilise artwork or music from another game, there would be an infringement of copyright. In contrast, if someone sees a successful idea they are allowed to make a game that is inspired by it, but they can't copy any part of it directly, or claim that it's based on the original game.



After Armor Games released *Siege Hero* many criticised it for stealing ideas from *Angry birds*, unaware of the legacy of *Crush The Castle*

Do many developers or publishers actively try to defend gameplay mechanics from being copied by other developers? Is it even worth it?

In my mind it's better to get to the market first with an original idea. People will copy it if it's good, no matter how hard you might try to protect it. If Firemint got bogged down with trying to stop people from copying *Flight Control*, they never would have gotten around to making the hit *Spy Mouse*. It's better to be a market leader than a market follower. Get inspired by other people's work but don't try to copy it as you will already be lagging behind the front of the pack.

What are the difficulties in protecting gameplay mechanics legally from being copied?

The difficulty is that there can be many different ways to arrive at a similar idea – if a game is successful, people look at it and copy it, without actually stealing the code or the artwork directly. Unless the mechanics have actually been lifted from the original and reused, there hasn't been an infringement of copyright.

It's not a problem that is unique to games. In film, for example, people have been writing boy-meets-girl stories since the Romans started going to toga parties. The tricky bit is putting a unique spin on it that people will engage with. In games there are many firstperson shooters, but people engage with particular ones because they like a particular aspect of the gameplay or the artwork. I actually think that now that games are less limited by what is technically possible, copyright will be less of an issue than before. It must have been much harder to make games of the same genre look substantially different from the competition 20 years ago.

Would any attempt to make it so gameplay mechanics can be more rigidly protected by copyright be constructive or detrimental to creativity in the industry?

The idea of copyright is that people's work builds on what has come before it. Copyright only lasts for 70 years past the life of the author. The reason for this is because at some point the need to protect a person's work is outweighed by the fact that it's in the interest of the greater good for it to be allowed to be copied. The idea is that copyright gives the creator a chance to make money off their work by having the exclusive right to do what they want with it.

The other thing to remember is that people legitimately do come up with the same things at the same time. Copyright doesn't stop this from happening. If a guy in the Ukraine comes up with a game about a goat that robs supermarkets, and you happen to release the same thing here, you can't stop them. They haven't copied you – they thought of it themselves.

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Deus Ex: Human Revolution 360, PC, PS3
Eidos Montreal's outstanding prequel has sparked furious debate in the **Edge** office. Not about the merits of transhumanism – we could all do with an upgrade or three – but about playstyle; the pacifists wearily shaking their head as the psychopaths gleefully recount the murder of an entire stationful of police. One thing we agree on, however, is that a basic right to privacy is a luxury in troubled times such as these – and that the head of security is obliged to read every other employee's private messages.

Driver: San Francisco 360, PC, PS3
Driver's San Francisco is a sandbox with more automotive toys than we deserve. The number of cars to unlock is intimidating, as is the variety of ways to smash their bonnets off, while the trickier time-attack challenges reveal a fine art to the game's driving underneath its big, car-hopping conceit. Welcome back, Reflections, you've been missed.

El Shaddai: Ascension Of The Metatron 360, PS3
The most chic fighter on 2011's catwalk, *El Shaddai* achieves that most delicate balance of beauty and brutality. Moving around the world is both sightseeing tour and a joyous ballet of seamless animations. The lush, crisp heavens are a place to worship, wonder and wander as much as a battleground.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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The best weapons don't need the biggest bangs

Resistance 3 presents a grittier scorched Earth than Insomniac has attempted before. It's bleak, oppressive and almost lost. You'd be forgiven for thinking the developer behind *Ratchet & Clank* is repressing its mischievous streak. At least, you would until you dip into the game's selection of off-the-wall weapons. The alternate fire modes of *Resistance 3* drastically affect the tone of the experience and your navigation of each showdown. It's a solid FPS in itself, but the guns are where the personality, the wayward fun, is at.

The requirement for weapons of mass destruction to be massively distracting is strictly adhered to by *Gears Of War*, of course, and its improbable – and presumably gasoline-guzzling – chainsaw bayonet. It's a deliriously stupid weapon, but it succeeds in rolling Gears' macho-industrial aesthetic and fetishistic approach to gore into a single lurid attack. *Gears Of War 3* (p96) expands the arsenal, with its burrowing-beast-firing Digger Launcher not only adding an underground trajectory to consider in combat but providing its own gory payoff for every shot.



But guns don't have to be built on gimmicks. Criterion's *Black*, in contrast to its quasi-successor *Bodycount* (p106), gave contemporary firearms a chic sheen and an undeniable showroom allure, granting personality even in their sterility. *Bodycount*, conversely, offers a bland visual take on modern weapons, redeemed by their heft and sense of power. Clattering audio and crumbling scenery conspire to convey weight to your pumping rounds. As shooters increasingly attempt to out-*Gears* Epic with extravagant weapon designs and unlikely hybrids, it's good to be reminded of the satisfaction of simple shooting, done well. *Bodycount* may get a lot of things wrong, but guns it gets right.

Gears Of War 3

Consider, if you will, the mighty Brumak. How fitting that the *Gears* bestiary should include a hulking, bipedal reptile. Strip away its gratuitous arsenal of machine-guns and rocket launchers – enough firepower to make the Earth resemble a planet-sized hunk of fruit with a bite missing – and the Brumak and Tyrannosaurus Rex could be cousins. Palaeontologists once peddled a view of dinosaurs as fabulously brawny creatures with walnut-sized brains. Many hold the *Gears Of War* series in identical regard.

Can you blame them? Marcus Fenix and his fellow COG soldiers boast lantern jaws, impregnable armour and necks with the sort of girth you only expect to find in an old-growth forest. Dazzling set-pieces and hyper-combustible action sequences bully their way into your brain's pleasure centre using spectacle, the bluntest of all aesthetic instruments (why pick a lock when you can batter the front door down?). Then there's the game's rabid fan community. Each new photo of a fan's COG-skull tattoo retweeted by Epic's Cliff Blezsinski further reinforces *Gears'* reputation as the game series for lunkheads.

Following a psychedelic, refreshingly non-gritty prologue dream sequence, *Gears Of War 3* opens with Fenix waking aboard a sort of post-apocalyptic Noah's Ark. The planet Sera is besieged by a newly evolved menace – the Lambent, a combustible breed of monster that makes the Locust from the previous games seem docile. Even the ocean has sprouted Lambent stalks that reach like gnarled tentacles from its choppy swells. A surviving remnant of COG soldiers has retreated to the ocean in warships, trying to survive long enough to devise a plan for rebuilding civilisation. Any thoughts of retaliation or heroism have long since been abandoned for the more pressing needs of survival.

Gears 3 makes use of environmental storytelling to powerful effect. As you move through the ship's creaking hull, the amount of care lavished on its smallest details makes the Normandy from *Mass Effect* seem personality-starved by comparison. A pair of ancient-looking arcade cabinets take on an odd poignancy when viewed as a means of killing time while aboard a doomed, drifting vessel. The cushions on a leather couch have gone hopelessly flat, their stuffing pokes out of creases that burst open years ago. One soldier chides another for "ruining the crossword" by neglecting to write his answers on a separate sheet of paper so the puzzle can be recycled by others.

Players who prize evisceration over exploration needn't worry. Even in scene-setting moments such as these, you can always rely on a fevered skirmish just around the bend. Likewise, pacing benefits from Epic's decision to minimise the stretches of dead air that plagued *Gears 2* as Fenix moved torpidly through a level with his finger wedged in his ear.

Publisher Microsoft Game Studios
Developer Epic Games
Format 360
Release Out now

The beauty of what Epic has achieved cannot be understated, as moments continually arrive that inspire awe



When the Lambent (or, in COG shorthand, 'glowies') finally arrive, it becomes clear that Epic has gone beyond a simple cosmetic refresh. The combustible, glowing-yellow Imulsion coursing through their bodies fundamentally alters the gameplay rhythm of the *Gears* experience. As the tentacles of mutated Lambent fire explosive globs of Imulsion over the top of cover, action takes on a more frenetic pace. Gone are the days of hunkering down, all but invincible, behind a chest-high wall and blind-firing your way to victory. Fighting the Lambent requires decisive movement and mastery of the evasive dive-roll.

If you're playing the campaign in co-op, the squad must focus its fire on the mutated tentacles to remove the explosive projectile threat before shifting focus to the head. A press of the left stick while aiming drops a marker on the targeted enemy, so squadmates know what to prioritise. If you kill everything but the head, it will slither across the ground to hunt you down and exact revenge. The freedom these Lambent mutations allow Epic in reshaping combat for up to four players makes up for any gravitas the game loses by pitting its heroes against big, glowy monsters. The Al-Qaeda stand-ins of other shooters just aren't as flexible a foe.

The game's arsenal provides a dizzying amount of options, each carefully balanced to a different tactical preference. For players who like to smell the breath of the enemy they're taking out, the Gnasher is joined by a sawn-off shotgun that deals devastating wide-angle damage, but only at point-blank range (beware the agonising ten-second reload). A heavy-weapon version of the sniper rifle delivers the king of one-hit kills. The Digger grenade sends an explosive critter burrowing a straight trail beneath the ground like Bugs Bunny, only to pop up behind cover where it explodes. And the Vulcan, which requires a second player to carry its ammunition box, is essentially a Mulcher on steroids.

The remainder of the roughly 12-hour campaign offers a tightly paced sequence of combat challenges that span a wealth of locations. The beauty of what Epic has achieved with the Unreal Engine 3 cannot be understated, as moments continually arrive that inspire genuine awe. In a visit to the seaside village that Dom Santiago and his family once called home, you're treated to a sleepy Mediterranean-style hamlet full of domed rooftops, worn cobbled paths and archways that frame the light of the sun slouching toward the horizon. A rescue mission through the woods on a full-moon night finds eerie shafts of moonlight filtering through craggy branches. If you fire on the imposing lobby window of one late-game architectural marvel, each pane of glass shatters in precisely the spot you target, breaking apart in shards that dangle briefly and tinkle to the floor.

Karen Traviss delivers a consistently engaging,



LEFT Bucking the series' penchant for unrelenting grittiness, Gears 3's opening dream sequence tries on impressionism for size. Just above the horizon in this scene lies a swirling cream-coloured vortex BELOW Dom proposes giving a visiting Chairman Prescott "the traditional Stranded welcome" by stripping his helicopter for parts



ABOVE The first thing you'll do in Horde 2.0 is purchase a command post. Fortifications appear in green silhouette if you've got the cash, red if you don't. As you use a category – spike strips, say – you'll gradually level it up





ABOVE The Hammerburst rifle delivers a wallop of extra damage to balance out its slow but punchy firing cadence. Prepare to scavenge for ammo, however, as it holds a scant 140 rounds

funny and well-plotted script – your eyes will only roll on the few occasions she opts for a heavy-handed morsel that just barely avoids the phrase "a brighter tomorrow". Most of the time you simply feel as though you're tagging along with a crew of likeable, wise-cracking soldiers who care about each other, even as they swap affectionate barbs and shout down the enemy hordes. During an early firefight amidst the COG ship's only food supply, Dom rages: "You fucked up our tomatoes, you assholes!" The fact that he's deadly serious makes the gag that much more amusing.

While there are plenty of enticements to replay the campaign – the new Arcade mode will even keep a score tally for each co-op player – *Gears 3*'s numerous other multiplayer modes promise to keep a vast percentage of *Gears 3* copies off the second-hand market for a good while. As series like *Halo* and *Call Of Duty* scramble to copy *Gears 2*'s popular survival mode, Horde, *Gears 3*'s forges ahead, embellishing the experience with tower-defence and RPG elements. Cash earned from killing enemies can be spent on building, upgrading and repairing fortifications such as spike strips, turrets and scarecrow-like decoys. Focusing on a specific type of fortification will add toward levelling up that category, which in turn gives discounts and enables you to build more effective varieties. The intermissions between waves pulse with tension as your team goes about its preparations industriously.

Beast Mode could easily have just flipped Horde on its head and kept the same exact rules, merely letting you play as the enemies of the *Gears* world. Instead you get a much more tactically driven experience in which you spend money on sending monsters into battle. Each time you scamper in with a Ticker and explode next to



STRUCK BY LIGHTING

Some of the most memorable sequences in *Gears Of War 3* revolve around high-intensity Unreal Engine 3 lighting effects. In one scene in Hanover as you approach a Stranded settlement, someone switches on a floodlight so intense that you feel the need to shade your eyes just as your character does precisely that onscreen. When you finally kill a massive Lambent Drudge, his body explodes with such force that the searing light given off by the blast feels mortally threatening. When you regain your vision, you feel as though you accomplished something merely by surviving the enemy's spectacular demise. And the god rays cast by the sun during one vehicle section look downright heavenly.

Chainsaw-executing Lambent enemies delivers a gratifying payoff, as they explode in a bright, sloppy shower of Imulsion. It's always a smart idea to finish off these Lambent Drudges before they sprout tentacle mutations

Stranded and COG hero NPCs, you bounce back to the monster selection screen. As you gain experience, you unlock new monster tiers. There's something deliriously enjoyable about seeing a Ticker or Corpser or Berserker teammate and not instinctively leaping for safe quarters. And if you blow your cash, you'll get well acquainted with the Ticker's comical jihad.

The carnage of competitive multiplayer plays out across a slew of new, fabulously immersive locales. The Thrashball map offers the perfect setting for a round of Team Deathmatch, seamlessly marrying theme and function. Snag a Mulcher in the stands and mow down opponents on the field. Or indulge in close-quarters combat in the locker room or hallways running through the wings of the stadium, praying you don't bump into someone with a sawn-off around the next corner. Epic has spent years honing competitive multiplayer, and it shows in each pulse-quickening standoff.

The degree of refinement and technical polish across every facet of *Gears 3* is enough to make most other games look tatty. A few head-scratching nitpicks exist – one level toward the end of the campaign finds you bumbling about trying to fight in near total darkness – but they don't chafe much. Even the legendary Marcus Fenix fluffs an active reload from time to time.

That conventional wisdom about dinosaur brain size? Mostly fallacious. Because the T-Rex had to hunt its prey on the run, it evolved excellent eyesight and a large brain. The conclusion of the *Gears* trilogy exhibits a similarly accomplished blend of might, scale and evolutionary rightness.

9

Post Script

Gears Of War 3 writer Karen Traviss on war, zombies and keeping it real

Warning: this section discusses critical* Gears Of War 3 *story elements, and therefore contains spoilers.

A "middle-aged English housewife" wrote *Gears Of War 3*. While that sinks in, absorb the fact that best-selling novelist **Karen Traviss** has a past steeped in the military and defence sectors, with a portfolio of science-fiction novels that makes her the perfect fit for Epic's world of grit and gore. We sit down with Traviss to talk about the game writing process, real-world influences and What Would Marcus Do?



Where do you draw inspiration for the soldiers' banter from?

It's largely the environment I've come from. I grew up in a naval town. Most of my family had either served in the army, navy or worked in the dockyard. These are the voices I've grown up with, effectively. I want my soldiers to sound like real people. Most civilians never meet someone in uniform; they have no idea what it is like. We have put this vast burden on this tiny number of beleaguered people. And we don't stand by them as a civilian population, and that's to our shame. But one thing I can do for these people is to say this is what they're like. I see so much mil-porn here, and it really angers me. Those aren't the people I've seen all my life.

"These are the voices I've grown up with, effectively. I want my soldiers to sound like real people"

***Gears 3* seems to have a cynical view of authority. Chairman Prescott's Azura feels like a sci-fi take on Baghdad's Green Zone. The elite sip martinis as the world outside goes to hell.**

When I was writing Prescott, every time I looked at the choices he had to make, he had the harder choice. This guy is the only reason there's anyone alive. What you're seeing in the game is [Delta Squad's] view of him. You've got people in Azura who've been there since the Pendulum Wars and this was their doomsday bunker. We've also got scientists who've been brought against their will going: 'What the hell, I didn't volunteer for this!' Well, where else are we going to do it, in your lab that's just been over-run? There are no black-and-white clear-cut things and that's what makes it interesting.

How hard was the decision to kill Dom?

It doesn't seem quite as big to me because it seemed a logical choice, drawing out the character. I've killed an awful lot of characters in different IPs. Because I'm 'Body-Bags Traviss', there will be bodies when I'm involved, because in a war, heroes get killed. Once you're told by an IP that someone is off-limits for killing, it emasculates it a certain amount. The risk has got to be there. You actually say: 'This is real life and this is what it feels like. What if it was real?'



With so much of *Gears'* story told through the environment, how do you work with Epic's design team to get those details right?

From a few early pieces of concept art I was able to extrapolate the whole world. A lot of it is driven by the concept art; it's not just about being pretty. It tells you about the world they live in, the nature of the economy, everything. In terms of the individual things, we ended up doing an enormous amount of nitpicking on things like air-raid warning signs and what would be on them. And I'd say: "Well, I come from Portsmouth – we knew all about that in the war". And then we'd have a discussion about what would be on Marcus's wall, and someone would say: "He'd have a girly calendar" and I'd say: "No, Marcus does not have girly calendars".

It really was that back-and-forth and knowing what every character would do, what they'd have in their pocket. I know what Cole would pick up in the supermarket. Because I've got enough of his fundamentals about his childhood, and what he values, what matters to him and what's non-negotiable, that I can extrapolate him further on.

So it was a deeply collaborative process?

Yes, because obviously there's no point me coming up with a terrific story if they can't make it work with the engine. And they'd come up with great gameplay and I'd say: "What have you done that for?" As I did to one level designer who took it terribly wrongly. He'd done this really great level, and I said: "You know Marcus wouldn't do that. Why would he do that?" Just as I need level designers to say: "We can't make that work" or: "They won't hear that happen because X will trigger".

Zombies have become one of gaming's biggest clichês. Does including zombie-like infected humans in *Gears 3* undermine the more serious aspects of the plot?

It depends how they're done. Those are gameplay decisions – you have to keep refreshing the threats otherwise every level will look the same. It makes the narrative point of Imulsion crossing over into the human population, colonising every living cell on the planet. If it works in context, if you've immersed people far enough in the game, they're going to see that as logical, as part of that universe. It won't drag [players] out of it. If you're just injecting things that don't flow naturally, I think it *can* drag them out of it. We've all seen games do it, where developers see things in another game and shove them in. We have to resist that urge, but also resist the urge to take things out just because they might remind players of another game. ■

Resistance 3

Publisher SCE
Developer Insomniac Games
Format PS3
Release Out now

The design principle of *Resistance 2*, seemingly, was escalation rather than careful iteration. Escalation of scale and difficulty without refinement or balance, descending into set-piece gazing, its monstrous bosses dislocating you from the spectacle when you should be centre stage. *Resistance 3* presses the reset button on the previous game's excesses and the delete button on Nathan Hale's two-game narrative. With him out of the picture, you're now in the shoes of a much more average Joe. New protagonist Joseph Capelli (Hale's executioner) is a family man first and a fighter second, reluctantly on a trans-American mission to end the Chimeran assault at the heart of New York. We first find our hero hiding out in the wilds of Oklahoma with a ragtag bunch of survivors who frequent the halls of a crumbling underground abode, quipping as you pass and getting on with the daily grind. It's an atmospheric piece of scene setting that's more nuanced and delicate than the series has ever previously demonstrated. It's also the most quietude the game offers: soon after, you're plunged into an adrenaline-charged showdown across some picture-perfect wind-swept autumnal streets before setting off on your travels.

Resistance 3 doesn't pause for breath; it takes in all of the traditional FPS scenarios – counter-sniping in the dead of night, escort missions and a spot of on-rails warfare – and throws as many weapon-based variables at them as it can summon up. Not all of Insomniac's ideas bear fruit, but there's enough verve to the set-pieces and fire in the game's belly to excuse some of the missteps along the way. Boss battles are few and far between, the game focused more on quickfire engagements that demand constant consideration for the holy trinity of health, ammo and environment. It's not Bungie-level strategy, but there's a much more precise art to survival in *Resistance 3* than the point-and-shoot procedures that defined its predecessor. You'll die many times approaching a fight with the wrong attitude, so finding cover and exploiting flanking are essential considerations, the multi-tiered environments offering plenty of opportunity for seizing a tactical advantage, and the transition from detailed interiors to vast open expanses showing off Insomniac's proprietary engine at its zenith. There's little visual repetition in the game's eight- to ten-hour campaign.

New guns come as thick and fast as the Chimera, and are the true stars of the show. While always inventive, Insomniac had previously struggled to find the perfect pacing to match its armoury. Here, there's a fine art to picking out the weapons you take into the thick of it (all selected by a pause menu rather than managed on the fly, providing a welcome break for air). No sooner have you got to grips with the Auger's X-ray shooting than you're rattling off rounds with the Marksman, a whopper of a rifle, popping Chimera mid-flight like clay pigeons. While the gimmickry of the Chimera tech – from jetpacks to shield drones that need offing before their fleshy companions can be killed – makes the action kinetic, it can't compensate for the AI's incompetence. Enemies charge you down like bulls or choose open spaces from which to attack, the Chimera's war philosophy favouring brawn over brain. But the few boss battles that are dotted through the campaign are much breezier and more animated affairs than before, a number involving some inspired destructible scenery, which goes some way to countering the shoot-the-red-bit grindwork.

This is the bleakest and loneliest entry in the franchise, a simple man-on-a-mission story imbued with a sense of futility

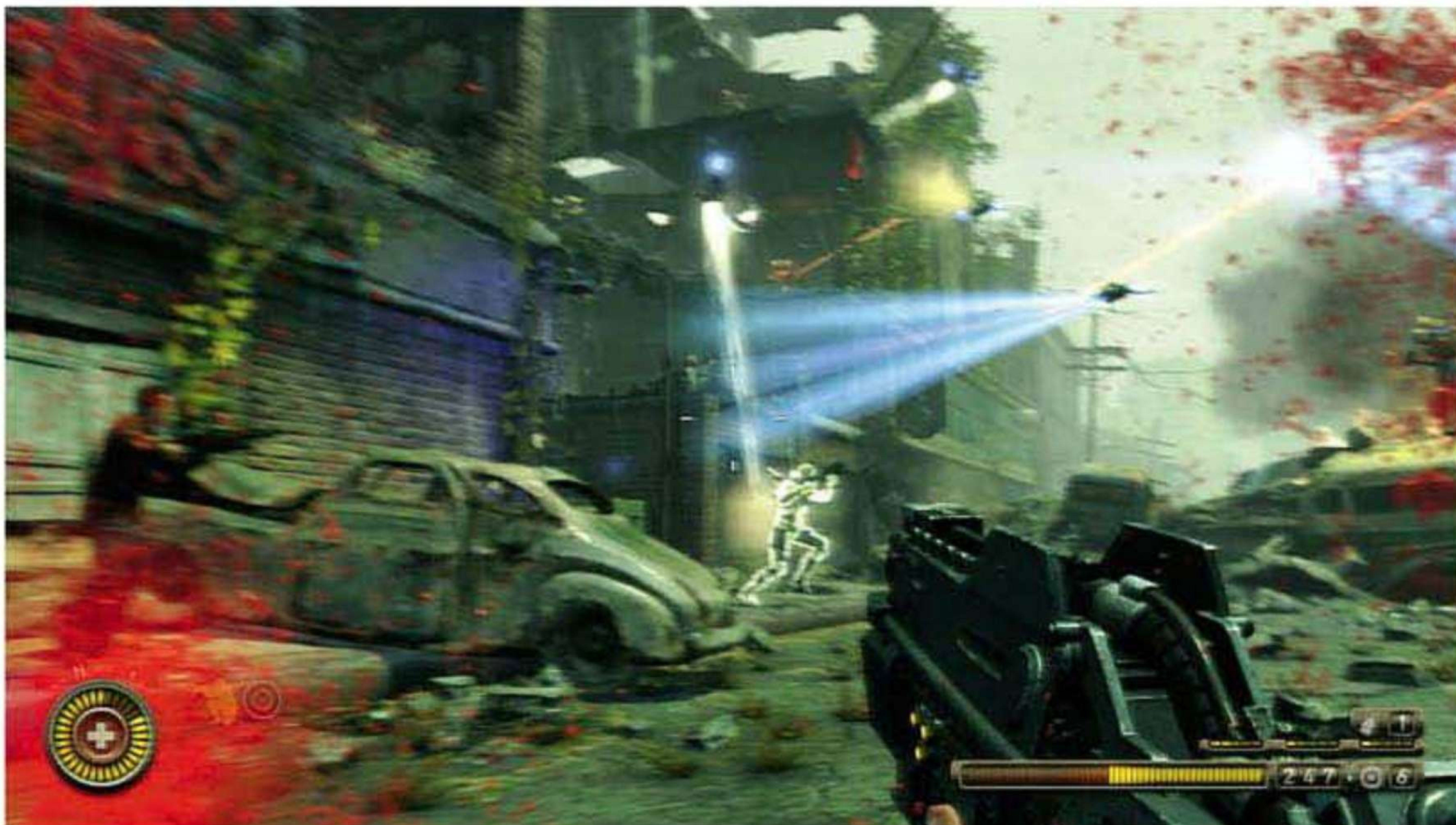


For all its ideas, *Resistance 3* remains staunchly old-fashioned, rejecting many tricks of the current FPS trade (you won't find rechargeable health or a limit on how many weapons you can carry here, though there is a two-weapon swap system) to remain true to more well-trodden paths. There's a distinct sense of a developer playing to its own strengths and having fun with it; aware of its own ability and keen not to overstretch itself. Secondary fire is clearly one of Insomniac's passions, and this opportunity to vent the science-fiction lunacy that has come to define the developer's oeuvre, whether it's the Magnum's detonation rounds or the Bullseye's triple lock-on, delivers new, more elaborate way to play with fire.

Playing to the studio's strengths also means that there's little narrative depth to Joseph Capelli's story. Dialogue is minimal and infrequent – reserved mostly for characters' monologues – as Insomniac tells its story visually, with rich environments and detailed, evocative set-dressing. In the thick of a brutal showdown it's encouraging to see a developer putting thought into the way its civilisation has been torn down around you, the memories of past tenants, old hangouts heavy in the air. If the team has learnt from other FPSes, it's obviously the fragile, threatened worlds of *Metro 2033* and *Half-Life 2*, games that harness their worlds to carry story and set the mood.

In a bid to avoid monotony, Insomniac introduces a human opponent to the final third of the game with an excursion into a Mad Max-style world of rebels, set in an overrun prison, that drastically alters the tone of the campaign. It's a distracting interlude and in its more grotesque and humanised brutality feels disjointed from the rest of the game. While initially an odd atmospheric tangent to the rest of the campaign, however, it succeeds in adding to the overall sense of fallen man that inhabits *Resistance 3*'s world. This is the bleakest and loneliest entry in the franchise, a simple man-on-a-mission story imbued with a sense of desperation and futility. When you eventually reach New York to find it frozen, decrepit and infested with

ABOVE Though *Resistance 3* is a more human story, Insomniac doesn't hold back from some breathtaking scale with the Chimera's mechanical offerings. **LEFT** Shield drones protect Chimera from your firepower, requiring you to focus your energies – and ammo – on them first before disposing of the infantry. The auto-aim is just the right side of generous to keep sharpshooting challenging and the drones vulnerable



BELOW QTE escapes from the clutches of Chimera give an ample window for escape. Melee attacks, useful for the rare stealth kill, are far too underpowered to be used as anything other than a last resort



A mid-game set-piece involves fending off a group of marauding madmen from a train. Unlimited health and ammo take the edge off the difficulty, while the bonus is an opportunity to take in some beautiful vistas



There's a breadth of Chimera types (all unlockable as skins in multiplayer), which forces you to vary your tactics. The final stages hurl all kinds at you, requiring you to be as mindful of sniper attacks as melee maulings

Chimera warriors and tech, the sense is that you're at the apex of the story that Insomniac has wanted to tell from the beginning of the series in 2006.

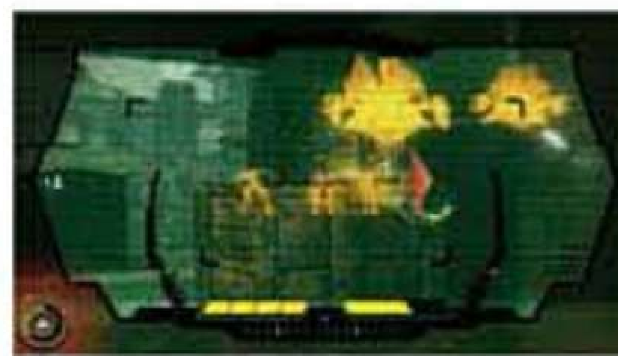
Multiplayer has been scaled down considerably since *Resistance 2*'s 60-player warfare, with maps now much tighter and more intimate to accommodate the lowered maximum headcount of 16 players. It offers a solid, if uninspired, set of areas that largely recycle the assets and locales of the campaign (a map set in Glamorgan, Wales, provides some of the best design with its outhouses and mixture of high and low vantage points). When you've amassed a range of upgraded weapons, deathmatches are heady, delirious affairs: at once unpredictable, outlandish and hilarious. It's when you're starting out with a bare-bones set of weapons and XP that it feels like a grind as you're pummelled by overpowered opposition. Small maps for up to four players provide some high points, cordoning off a number of the campaign's highlight areas in which to rain hell. The eight-vs-eight matches are, of course, much more lively, but can feel imbalanced as the many variables Insomniac introduces – regularly awarded for kill streaks – offer some unfair advantages to players already at the top of their game. With such an obvious level of restraint in *Resistance 3*'s singleplayer offering, the team has clearly been able to relax creatively in multiplayer, giving the experience a unique identity of its own that's more vibrant, and even more violent, than its campaign counterpart. It's no *COD* killer, but the range of collectibles and customisations, unlocked through the now-standard XP ladder, provides a good amount of longevity.

The campaign can be played co-operatively in its entirety, but tackling it in this way detracts from the experience, damaging the man-on-a-mission intimacy of the journey. *Resistance 2*'s decision to reserve a separate chunk of story for two players provided a much more tailored scenario; here it feels shoehorned in. It serves only to highlight that *Resistance 3* is best experienced by a lone player, running the Chimera gauntlet and discovering the game's often crazy charms as your weapons chew a path to the conclusion.

Resistance 3's variety of enemies and their multi-tiered, multi-directional assaults (particularly in the final stretch) means that making use of its PlayStation Move compatibility can be a tricky, cumbersome way to go about your business. As with Zipper Interactive's *SOCOM: Special Forces*, using the Move setup ultimately proves to be the least convenient way to play, providing little beyond novelty. Aiming down your weapon's sights should be where Move excels but instead the clunky calibration hampers the experience.

Resistance 3's strict linearity and hand-holding add up to an experience that feels like a dash through a film set, but the movie in question has enough charisma to make it worth seeing, with a new creature around every corner and a new weapon with which to dispatch it around the next. From the beginning of the series Insomniac pitched its design tent somewhere between B-movie cliché and heavyweight FPS contender, and those two polarities go hand in hand here, the result being an energetic, if disposable, adventure. It lacks the connective tissue to join its bite-size skirmishes into a seamless epic, but as a lightweight pick-up-and-play romp, *Resistance 3* is hard to resist.

7



USE OF WEAPONS

Resistance 3 destroys any semblance of realism (with the exception of quick-swapping weapons and the absence of rechargeable health) regularly and with admirable gusto. In a world as absurd as *Resistance*, after all, why play it too straight? Weapons upgrade themselves when you reach milestones, fixed health stores replenish to ease the chore of certain set-pieces, and the Auger (pictured above) is a feisty rehash of *Perfect Dark*'s Farsight. The latter option can actually make certain areas a little too easy to bypass as enemies remain statue-like while you pump bullets at them through walls.

Post Script

Interview: Cameron Christian, senior singleplayer and lead multiplayer designer

Cameron Christian is new to the *Resistance* series but a veteran of the FPS genre. A former designer at Treyarch, his portfolio has a pedigree suited to high-end, big-budget action games. He has been instrumental in shaping *Resistance 3*'s more earthy, gritty direction, bringing his experience with titles like *Call Of Duty 3* into the Insomniac fold. Here, he tells us why smaller can be better, and how the studio behind *Ratchet & Clank* finished its fight.



***Resistance 3* is a more intimate story – why did you decide to take a more humanised approach?**
The previous games have been military focused, you are this big super-soldier taking on the Chimeran army. We kind of pulled back. We wanted to make Joe Capelli, after being kicked out of the army, a real human character. We wanted to focus on the human element. Now that the humans have pretty much lost the war, how do they get on with their lives? That was a big focus for the story, and is reflected a lot in the gameplay.

There's still a sense of Insomniac 'silliness', especially in the weapons. How did you balance that with the more gritty narrative approach?
We definitely have some exotic weapons. Insomniac is known for that, but we tried to ground the weapons more. They should feel more salvaged, cobbled together – especially the human weapons. Hopefully they feel grounded despite being crazy.

In terms of the weapon-design process, presumably a lot of ideas were left on the cutting-room floor.
It's funny, you design weapons and are like, "This is awesome," and then it completely fails. We wanted to do a Chimeran shotgun – the whole premise was that it'd shoot out pellets that bounce off walls, so you could bounce bullets to kill around corners. So we started using it in game and because our geometry and collision is so dense, nothing ever bounced very far – you'd end up shooting yourself in the face.

What influences fed into the game's development?
In terms of story, there are things like The Road, The Walking Dead – a family just trying to survive. We really wanted to show an atmosphere, people struggling – the *Half-Life* series does a great job of showing atmosphere, taking time to immerse the player and keep them engaged. As far as weapons go, we looked a lot at the previous *Resistance* games. Insomniac has built this huge library of weapons between *Resistance* and *Ratchet*. We do look at *Ratchet* and see if there's any cool weapons or parts of weapons we can pull.

"Now that the humans have pretty much lost the war, how do they get on with their lives? That was a big focus"



How much cross-pollination is there between the *Ratchet* and *Resistance* games?
Previously, Insomniac was doing one game at a time – we'd do *Resistance*, then *Ratchet* – but since opening a studio in North Carolina we have two teams working at the same time. So the North Carolina team was working on the *Ratchet* game *All 4 One* while we where working on *Resistance 3* in Burbank.

***Resistance 3* feels old-fashioned and linear – how did you determine what to borrow from other FPSes?**
That was partly the community – they were vocal. We as designers missed the weapon wheel and what it allowed us – the strategy in battles. We decided we wanted an upgrade system for the weapons, so each has two levels of upgrade. It kind of edged into the level design. Levels became more open. Still linear, but there are more paths, options, snipers here, weapons there.

Why did you scale down the boss battles?
We wanted to focus the combat a lot more. Those boss battles were awesome but you couldn't move around, they were more cinematic. We wanted a lot more mobility in the bosses this time around; we wanted them up in your face, to be able to fight them in different ways. The bosses are a little bit smaller. We do have bosses two and three stories tall, but they're a lot more mobile, they can destroy and change the environment. That was a push early on.

The multiplayer has also been scaled down considerably from *Resistance 2*.
With *Resistance 3*, early on, maybe the first year, it was a different lead [designer]. I came on a year into it. That lead of multiplayer was [previously] the lead of co-op in *Resistance 2*, so early on they'd wanted to make combat more focused, already looking at smaller player counts. We were bringing back the weapon wheel and wanted to showcase class-based abilities. With those huge numbers it's hard to really show that stuff off. One of Insomniac's things is every Friday the whole company plays multiplayer for an hour. Lots of feedback, internal dialogue: 16 players was the right number. We can really focus on the quality of the levels with that number; we don't have to worry about pushing huge numbers.

The game ends quite abruptly and ambiguously. Do you see this as the start of a new trilogy?
We really see this as the end of a trilogy. *Resistance 2* had a big cliffhanger but here we wanted to tie up the story, give you a sense of hope but leave it open. There could definitely be some more stories to come. There's a sense of closure but room for possibilities. ■

Dead Island

Conceived in 2005, *Dead Island* finally makes its shambling way to shop shelves, invigorated by a promotional boost but carrying some telltale traits picked up during its six-year gestation. What began as a straight survival FPS – a wide-eyed go-anywhere, wield-anything premise – arrives looking a bit peaky. We spy *Borderlands*-shaped toothmarks on its loot-focused weapon customisation and fourplayer online co-op. Elsewhere, NPCs bear *Oblivion*-esque side missions – with none of Bethesda's branching outcomes – while zombie types echo *Left 4 Dead*'s. Only Banoi Island itself remains Techland's own, complete with all the texture, audio and animation glitches we've come to expect from its Chrome Engine.

Dead Island delivers death by a thousand cuts, both literal and figurative. The literal cuts are almost good fun. As zombie hordes (or, thanks to limited tech, zombie tens) shuffle closer, a series of melee blows result in chucklesome injuries. Wrenches split heads, butchers' knives cleave legs clean off and baseball bats dislocate arms, leaving them swinging impotently from the shoulder. Hit a sprinting infected with a well-timed swipe and its head pops off in slow motion as momentum sees the body comically run on by. In a game about bashing zombies, the zombies look suitably bashed. The problems arise from the bashing.

For a game built primarily around melee combat, the swinging arc is an inexact science. Some blows clip enemies visibly out of reach, while others refuse to snag bodies filling the screen. The vital kick move, handily knocking attackers down, sees the player's leg constantly alter its length. Sometimes we are lanky Bruce Campbell, at others a wee Sarah Michelle Gellar. The mystery of this ever-changing limb is more engaging than Techland's yarn. Console players get the added bonus of an inconsistent auto-aim, refusing to dish out the head lops that come more easily to PC mouse-wielders. What should be laughs of vindictive satisfaction are more often snorts of genuine surprise.

The survival fiction is particularly inept. Items respawn after a short window of time, lending infinite resources to a narrative that trades on desperate struggle. On a micro level, it leads to the absurd. Characters cry about dehydration as energy drinks lie at their feet, while tricky supply runs sit at odds with the infinite quantity of canned food in the room next door. And these inconsistencies cannot be forgiven with a weary shake of the head. Ongoing trade missions can be exploited as XP mines, while weapons need never go blunt thanks to endless trading funds. Only an awkward shopping interface dissuades such underhand play – every item has to be sold one unit at a time. Selling 17 magnets in a row is a true survival horror.

Enemies also magically reappear in precisely the same locations. Banoi operates with the mechanical efficiency of a ghost train: you mentally map which corpses suddenly spring to life and note the back alleys that lead to bigger brute types. Where progress should be a tense procession of life-or-death decisions – do you settle for a knockdown or sacrifice weapon integrity on a kill? – Banoi undermines your every move. Is Techland riffing on Dawn Of The Dead's notion that zombies return out of "some kind of instinct – memory of what they used to do"? In the 1978 zombie movie, it was satirical. Here, it seems farcical; a neat and tidy undead Westworld, reset every morning for the next busload of Romero buffs.

Publisher Deep Silver
Developer Techland
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

In a game about bashing zombies, the zombies look suitably bashed. The problems arise from the bashing



Find three other Romero buffs and *Dead Island* improves. For starters, competing to find the NPC with the worst acting on Banoi is a fun pastime, but playing with company certainly helps make sense of the four character skill trees. In singleplayer, both the throwing and firearms classes are at a disadvantage against the AI's rush tactics. And the gun-free opening area makes the markswomen all but pointless for the first five hours of the game. Let two melee-trained friends take the close-quarters brunt, however, and some semblance of tactics emerges. And neat matchmaking – the game automatically invites you to join strangers with similar level and story progress – means *Dead Island* rarely has to be endured alone.

Playing with close friends proves more problematic. Enemies level with the highest-ranking player, so newcomers joining at a later point find the odds stacked against them. Thanks to weapon levelling, during our playtest one online companion was unable to wield any of the tools available to him. In order to develop his stats to a basic stick-waving standard, we had to sniff out lone zombies, disarm them (literally) and let the newbie sheepishly kick them to death. Pangs of paternal pride aside, this is a ludicrous solution to a problem that shouldn't be there in the first place.

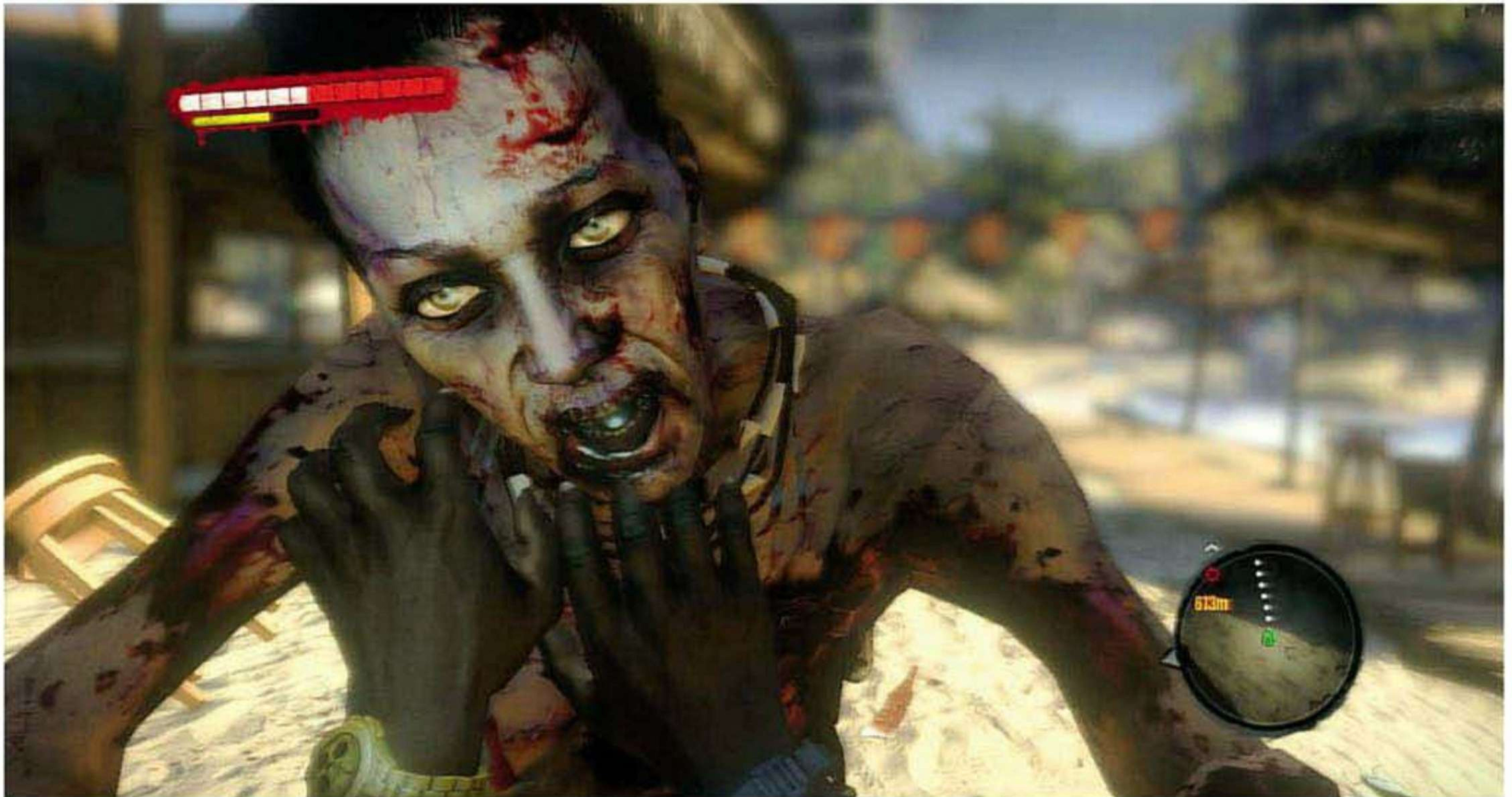
The remainder of the time is spent wrestling with a checklist of flaws. Lazy asset recycling, ugly character models (every female has porn-star proportions and the bikini to prove it), loose driving and inconsistent world logic (some doors breakable, some not) remind us that Banoi comes from the same place as *Call Of Juarez: The Cartel*. An additional quirk sees everyone refer to your character as 'him' – even if you play as a woman. Considering our aforementioned proportions, this seems particularly inexplicable. The world doesn't have the charm to warrant forgiveness, and progress-halting bugs prevent it anyway. With regular AI freezes and vanishing items, a mistimed autosave can prove fatal. Ultimately it all invites the refashioning of another line from Romero. When there's no more room in development hell, the dead losses will walk the Earth.

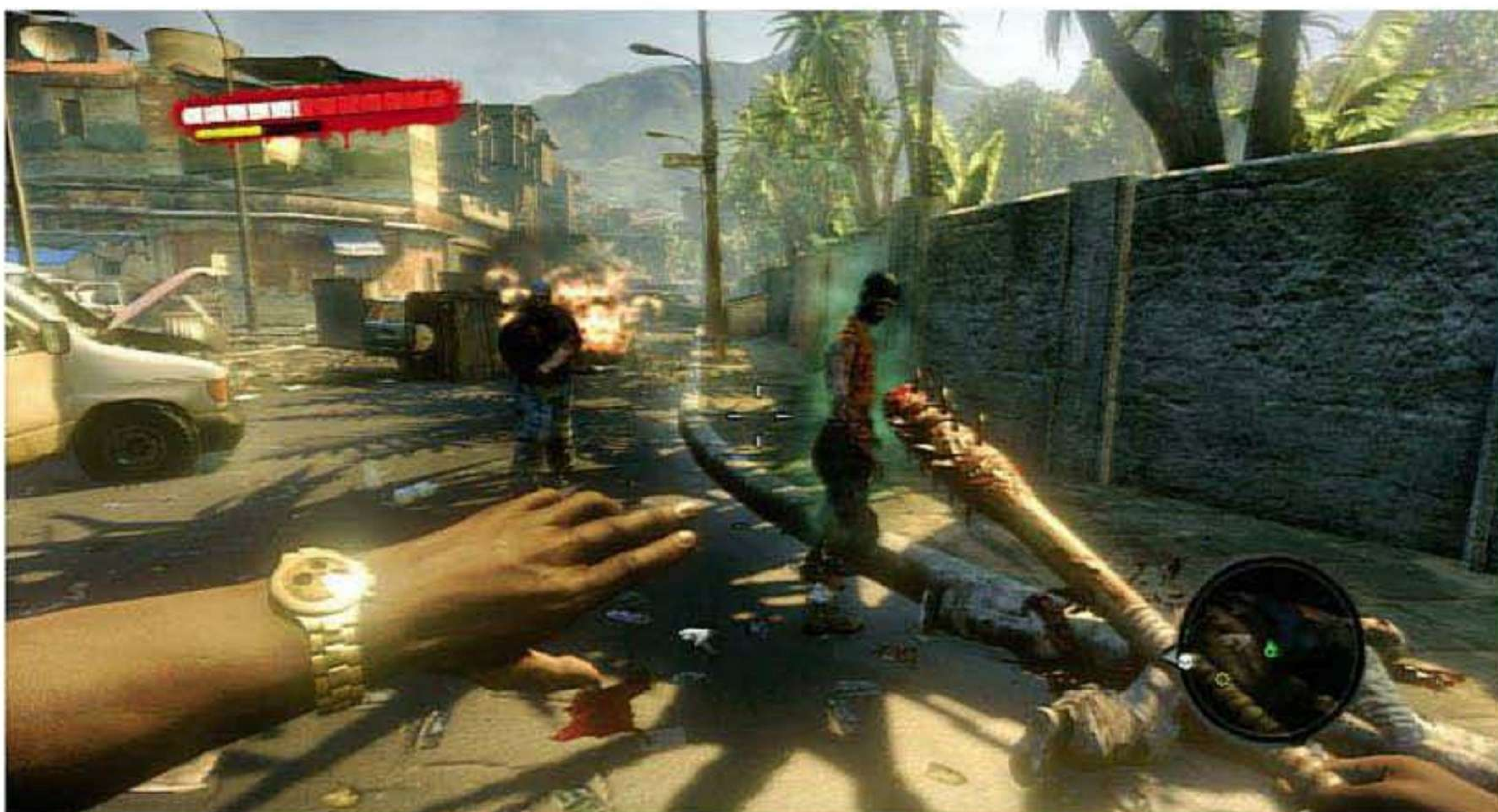
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ABOVE Gun-toting maniacs in the game's city area introduce firearms to the equation (along with their airy and gutless recoil), but it's not until the final area that ammo supplies make them worthwhile companions





TOP Physical exertion is limited by a stamina meter. While a few weapon swings will leave you huffing and puffing, the game permits lengthy fleeing. Bizarrely, characters can kick away with the wild abandon of a can-can dancer. ABOVE Close-contact nibblers need to be pushed away with a QTE. The same trigger-mashing every time sucks away any urgency these clashes might once have had. LEFT Weapon upgrades tap into a sillier vein: taping batteries to machetes electrifies swipes, nails add bleeding damage to wooden sticks, while toxic mods will poison on contact. (Quite how it's possible to poison the undead is a debate for another time and place)

Bodycount

Bodycount is Codemasters' attempt to muscle in on the mainstream FPS market, but it suffers from the same identity crisis that befell *Operation Flashpoint: Red River* recently. It's a game with one foot in the past and one in the present, lacking the confidence to deliver either classic old-school thrills or contemporary blockbuster highs.

Sent in to tackle an escalating conflict between warring factions, it's your job to aim big guns at big blokes and hope they hit the ground first. The plot – certainly not the gameplay – gets complicated when The Target, a shadowy group of sci-fi villains, gets in on the action, introducing some jarringly ugly futuristic designs to the mix.

What *Bodycount* gets right is its lineup of weapons, perhaps unsurprising with *Black*'s senior designer Stuart Black having a hand in the game's early development. Shotguns pack a powerful, ear-splitting punch and machine-guns rattle and hum as you unleash bucketloads of bullets at waves of racial stereotypes. *Black* built a gauntlet of set-pieces around the beating heart of its firearms but *Bodycount* attempts – unsuccessfully – to weave a more extravagant world and narrative around all the shooting and shouting. Your travels take in Africa, East Asia and the porcelain white innards of The Target's bases, but the proprietary EGO engine is no Unreal, and the visuals, spine-chillingly, bring to mind *Conduit 2,* with rough edges and crude textures.

The early missions, set among decaying shanty towns drenched in pastel washes, initially evoke *Bulletstorm*'s bold cartoon aesthetic but the similarities, sadly, end there. Where People Can Fly married its grand environments to the tone of its over-the-top narrative and slapstick action, *Bodycount*'s bland plot and banal characterisations fail to mesh with the exuberance of its colour scheme or the high-score nature of its gameplay.

Enemies are one-liner-churning chumps, regularly discovered in the middle of a corridor with no idea where they are and, seemingly, who you are. Hit detection can be inconsistent, too, as your shots zip under and over the shambling fools populating each short level of the six-hour campaign. Anything other than sitting ducks, however, would pose a big problem to your thumbs, because movement around *Bodycount*'s battlefields is heavy, sluggish and laboured. A temporary adrenaline shot allows you to move faster on your feet, but it's still not enough to remedy the slow pace (specials such as the adrenaline shot and air-strike require a staggering number of collectible orbs to charge up, too). The game's aiming mechanic, in which holding the left trigger fixes you in position – allowing you to bob up, down and side to side – is vital for headshots and quick escapes.

Publisher Codemasters
Developer In-house
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

The bland plot and banal characters fail to mesh with the high-score nature of its gameplay



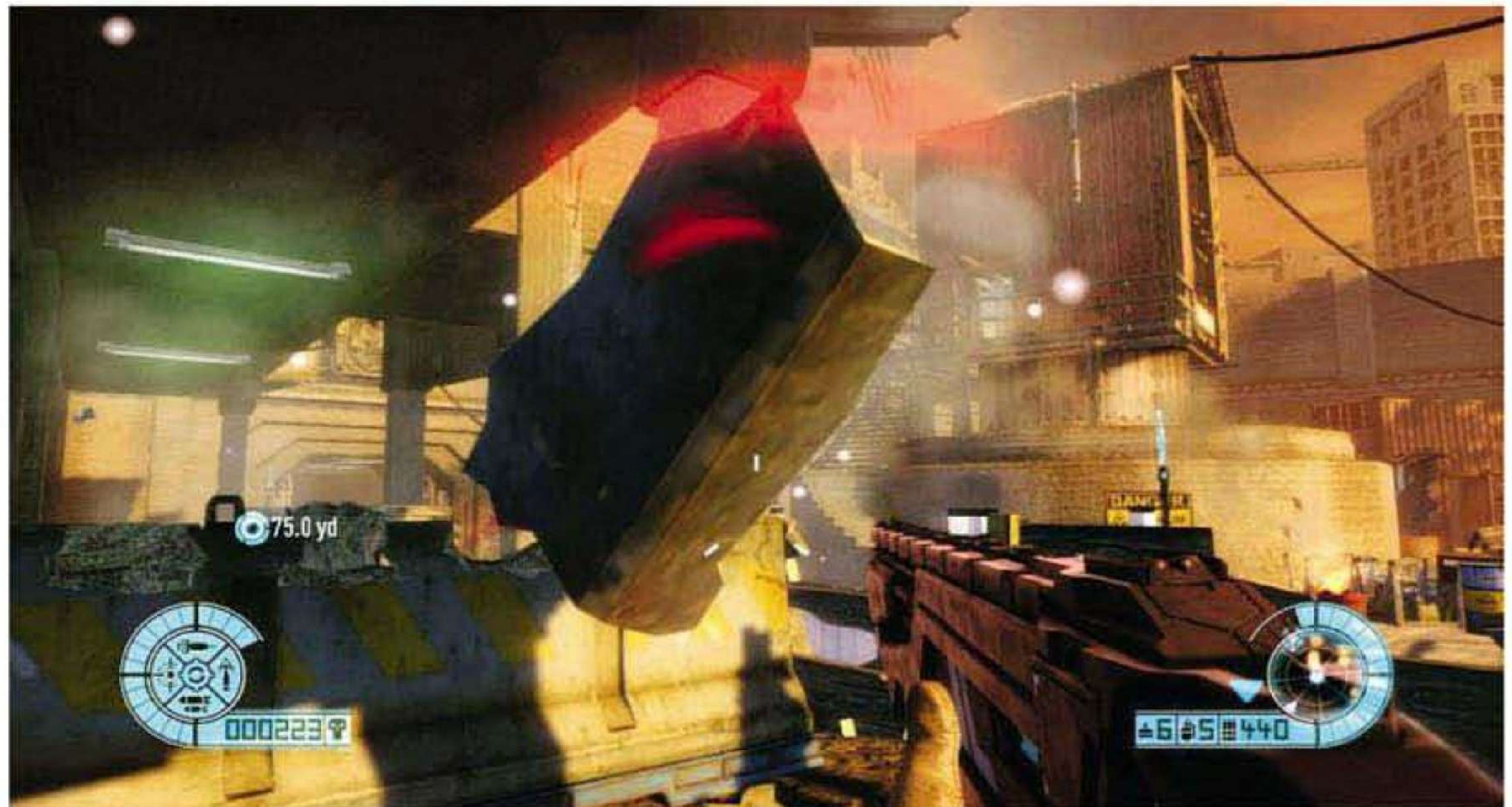
For all the talk of the game's 'shreddable' environments, and the promises made by some excellent early showings, the gimmick is just that: a contrivance that does little to contribute to, or truly enhance, your enjoyment of the campaign. The restrictions on your ability to bring the houses down – some windows can be shot out, some walls can be blown to bits – result in frequent confusion as you attempt to blast your way through a weak-looking gate that's frustratingly not on the list of destructible scenery. The problem becomes more severe in the thick of a shootout, as you get behind cover without knowing if it'll hold strong or crumble in an instant. A second playthrough goes some way to resolving the issue, but by then the taste has already been soured.

When the disparate pieces of *Bodycount*'s best design choices eventually come together, though, the game comes close to moments of shock and awe. The thrill of pinpointing an enemy in hiding and then demolishing their cover is gratifying; particle effects, sparks and bodies fly with blink-fast velocity. The game's final third manages to squeeze in some nail-biting skirmishes as The Target begins to take over the industrial wastelands of China. The level design is more linear here, the scenery more destructible, and the need to monitor your resources (rather than rely on the comfort of overly generous checkpoints) is imperative. The timing of every reload is pivotal to the outcome of a fight and it's crucial that you fill your two weapon slots wisely. In this final stretch *Bodycount* feels focused and driven, despite the cringeworthy plot and tiresomely derivative mise-en-scène.

Multiplayer, in which campaign missions are cordoned off to form arenas for standard and team deathmatches, is where *Bodycount* is at its best. In memorising the maps you learn the structural weak spots of buildings and cover, solving the problem of inconsistent destruction that plagues the singleplayer campaign. Maps are the perfect size for a maximum of 12 players and the central conceit – collect intel orbs from downed opponents to unlock weapon drops – leads to a race for arms that is both tense and riveting. If *Bodycount* had capitalised on this engaging slant on the arena-based shooter, it would have given the game a considerable shot in the arm, and hopefully this portion of the package will be bulked out over time.

Bodycount's lack of consistent game design, flitting between arcadey action and a sub-par story-driven campaign, ultimately causes the game to misfire. The lesser parts of *Bodycount*'s gameplay ultimately shout the loudest, drowning out its charms and distracting from the flourishes of inspired ideas. Hopefully Codemasters will learn from this that an FPS can rarely, if ever, be all things to all audiences.

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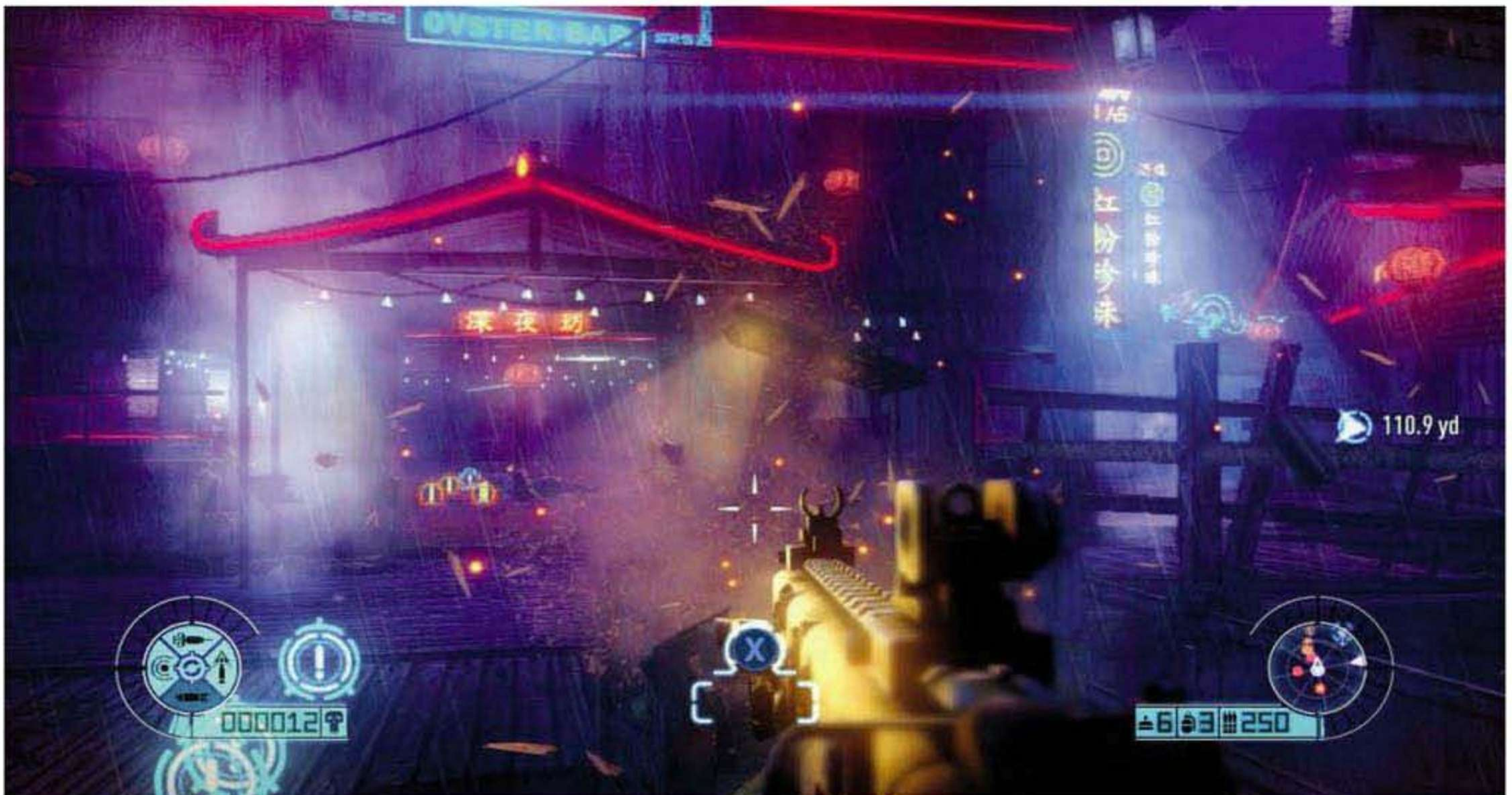


RIGHT Aside from offering eye candy as things go boom, the destructible scenery can also hamper your view. Shrapnel, dust and (pictured) showers of concrete all need to be navigated by your bullets if you're shooting to kill.
BELOW Enemies pop and shoot but rarely flank or pose a direct threat, and the environments are rote box-ticking exercises (explosive crates seem to be the cover of choice)





ABOVE Kills in the repetitive singleplayer campaign earn orbs that pay for special attacks and moves. Racking up points ranks up your profile in a nod to… well, almost every shooter to emerge since the first *Modern Warfare*



Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine

Publisher THQ
Developer Relic Entertainment
Format 360, PC, PS3
Release Out now

In an era of skillshots and RPG cross-breeding, the boldest gimmick is to have no gimmick at all. Judged by these standards, *Space Marine* is a staggeringly brave project. A linear action game built from asset re-use and endless indistinguishable encounters, you switch between ranged weapons and a selection of melee axes, hammers and chainswords. You toss a few grenades, and then you do it all over again.

In theory, it's that looping 30 seconds of fun, but while Relic has nailed the repetition, it lacks the synergy between AI and level design that turns each skirmish into a laboratory for bone-splintering experimentation. Instead, the game's Orks and Chaos Daemons either run straight for you or stay back and fire off rockets, while most missions play out in a series of trenches, corridors and poky arenas. Visually, it's not a bad piece of work: character models are charismatic and toy-like in all the right ways, while the weapons-producing Forge World that provides the setting is an interesting mix underneath all that brown texturing – part factory and part cathedral. It's let down, though, by ceaseless shuffling trips between one elevator and the next, and a lacklustre itinerary. There's a bit on a train, and a bit in a sewer. In the moments that lie in between, Mark Strong and a selection of other Brits are left to do their best with a deathly script filled with expositional redundancies and a plot twist with megawatt levels of obviousness.

Space Marine's single lunge at mechanical cleverness, meanwhile, comes in the form of your health meter, which can only be topped up through executions and through Fury, which is an overpowered attack mode you can trigger after dealing out a certain amount of damage. It's simple but effective: your fate is in your hands, and you grow healthier through slaughter.

It's all very on-message, as are the weapons which, given the game's tabletop roots, will bring their own lore with them for the more committed Warhammer 40,000 fans. If you're new to the series, though, you'll likely find that the bolter makes for a decent, if undistinguished, assault rifle, that the plasma pistol is identical to *Halo*'s, right down to the charged shot, and that the real fun is left for the more exotic toys. The melta is a genuinely ingenious blend of flamethrower and shotgun, for example, while the chainsword revs and roars through the air like a tiny Spitfire coming in for a strafing run.

Since so much of *Space Marine* is spent blindly hacking away at crowds, Relic has at least brought a certain competence to the second-by-second butchery. Gunplay is aided by a generous auto-lock, and melee is enlivened with a tiny but well-judged slow-mo that kicks in on finishers. Meanwhile, as the game's single palette cleanser, the jump-pack that boasts a targeted ground-pound is an excellent kind of fun during the rare sequences in which you're allowed to use it.

Those moments aside, *Space Marine*'s campaign quickly becomes pretty tedious – a problem that is only aggravated by an unfortunate sense of familiarity. Warhammer 40,000's iconography has been so heavily raided over the years that genuine Space Marines just blend into the crowd. All Games Workshop really has of its own now are Latin names, a promising but undeveloped moral ambiguity (given your faction's decidedly fascist overtones), and an embarrassing teenage vividness to the power fantasy. In flared armour, you play the role of a ceramic bully, and the Orks are your lurid green fall guys. With an enemy this witless, slogging through *Space Marine* becomes a little like watching a bodybuilder defeat a selection of muttering watermelons. Or maybe it's merely class warfare of a very British kind: steroidal aristocracy besting some under-evolved barrow-boys. You might almost think of Wodehouse, if it wasn't for all the grenades.

> In flared armour, you play the role of a ceramic bully, and the Orks are your lurid green fall guys

Towards the second half of the campaign, the game seems to be building towards a huge payoff: a shift in scale that promises some pleasingly overpowered revenge for all the inching along in trenches. It's an obvious opportunity, and so it's all the stranger when Relic ducks it completely, allowing the game to grind itself out in an unnecessary and repetitive final act that concludes with a poorly calibrated QTE boss battle.

It's left to multiplayer to save the day, and it does a better job of it than you might expect. With only two modes – deathmatch and a territory capture setup – and a familiar mixture of perks, loadouts and levelling unlocks, it's entirely lightweight, but it's padded with an excellent customisation system that allows fans to deck out their warriors in the same colours and insignias as their tabletop forces.

It's worth remembering that, if you have your own tabletop armies, you're likely to be won over by the sheer brand awareness of Relic's work: the reverent detailing the developer has brought to the cast, arsenal and plotting. For everyone else, however, you're left with an action game that has little in the way of ambition or grit. Despite the air of brutality *Space Marine* tries to cultivate, it's ultimately defined by convenience; by linear levels where you follow the green lights of unlocked doors from one corridor to the next, while the gentle trickle of upgrades and new weapons does just enough to keep you playing. The result is sometimes casually enjoyable, but never vivid, or memorable, or truly involving.

"In the grim darkness of the far future there is only war," states the campaign's opening blurb. In this case, that just isn't enough.

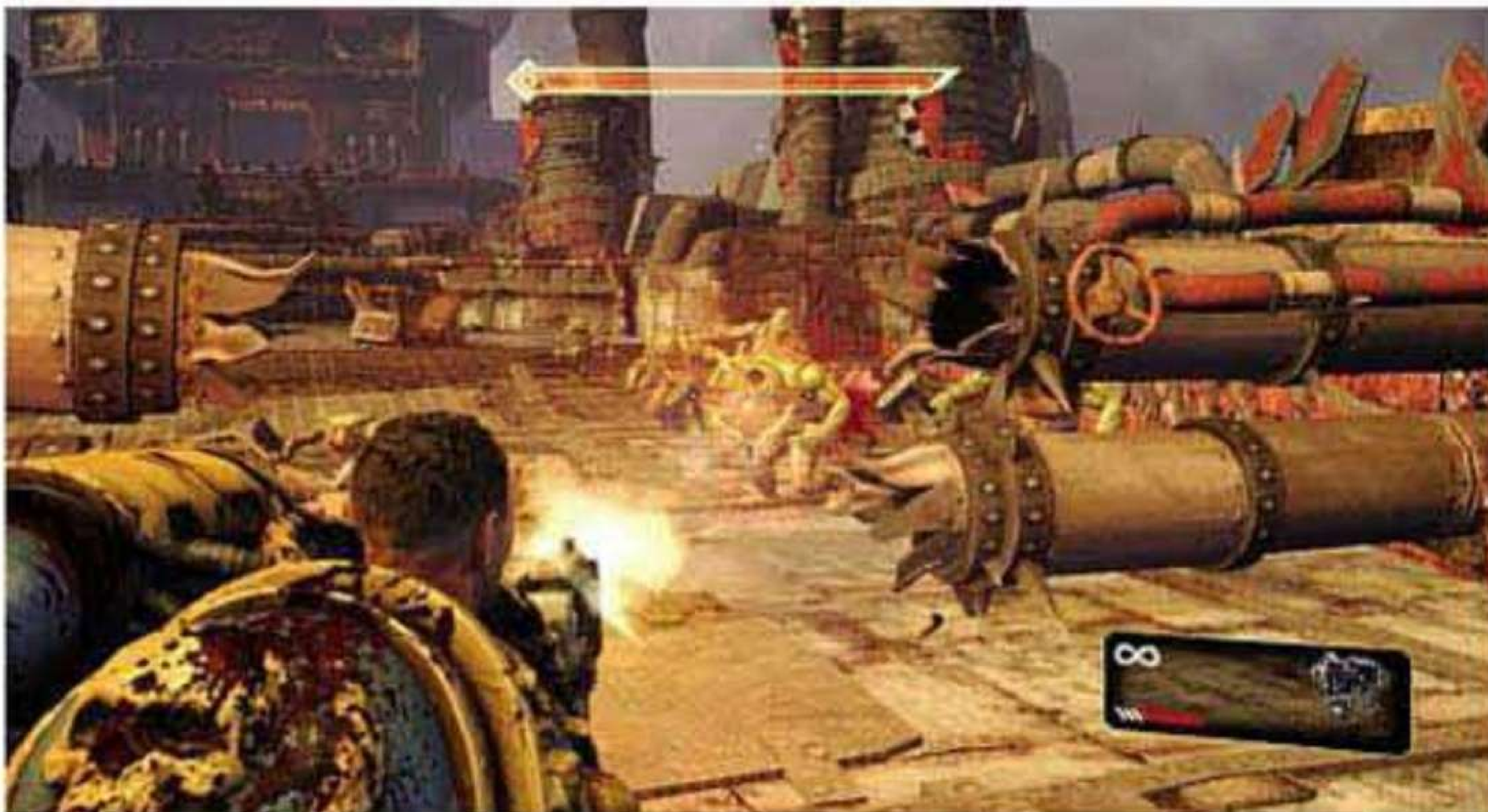
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THIS IS ORKWARD
In *Space Marine*'s brown and barren world, it's down to the Orks to add a pleasant element of madness to the art design. It's often brilliant stuff, too, as they advance into battle with leering skulls bolted haphazardly to the front of their scrap-metal war machines, or race through the air with rockets strapped to their backs. They enter most fights wearing costumes more suited to a game of American football, while their weapons caches look like unstable piles of Guy Fawkes Night supplies.



The forces of Chaos turn up around the halfway point, but aside from colourful character models, the only particularly notable thing they bring to the battle is a tendency to jog against the walls





ABOVE Space Marine Captain Titus drops into the action like the Master Chief, and slows down during dialogue like Marcus Fenix. The slope of his face, meanwhile, gives him the air of an aristocratic simian

ABOVE *Gears Of War* may have raided Warhammer for sartorial notes, but in terms of gameplay it's *Space Marine* that finds itself playing catch-up. Sadly, its Bomb Squigs are not as brilliantly unpleasant as *Gears*' Tickers, while its executions are smothered in blood and particle effects, perhaps to hide the cut-price animation. RIGHT Ground troops repeat the same handful of lines, and most of them are "Space Marines!" Delivery is awestruck if spoken by a human, and horrified if said by an Ork. The effect is first strange, then comic, and then annoying



Rise Of Nightmares

Rise Of Nightmares is Sega's test to see if there's an audience for violent, subversive firstperson hacking and slashing using Kinect. There's a haunted forest, a haunted castle and more walking dead than you can bludgeon with an iron pipe; it's just a shame the act of bludgeoning is so tiresome.

On a mission to rescue a damsel in distress, you take on the role of everyman Josh – victim of a derailed train in the Romanian countryside and, fortunately, a dab hand with anything sharp and heavy.

Rise Of Nightmares is a dedicated Kinect firstperson action game. As a result it's both commendably ambitious and frustratingly inconsistent. Locomotion requires stepping forward or back, turning requires a rotation of the shoulders, and attacks are conducted with a boxing stance. It's initially awkward, at times painful, but after a couple of hours the game's rhythm of kill-kill-open-door sets in and you're able to find a comfort zone. Turning never feels intuitive, however, making for frequent impalements on wall spikes in some of the game's booby-trapped scenarios. Overall level design is basic enough to accommodate your poor mobility, though, and the few puzzle rooms are simple enough to break up the relentless limb removal.

***Rise Of Nightmares* has the bloodlust of *Condemned* but little of the atmosphere. The presence of an auto-navigation shortcut acknowledges that your gestures aren't always enough to get you where you need to be**

Publisher Sega
Developer AM1
Format 360 (Kinect only)
Release Out now



SHAKE IT ALL ABOUT
Rise Of Nightmares throws up frequently absurd situations requiring an exhaustive range of actions. From ducking spikes to covering your ears to defend against a wailing undead opera singer, AM1's designers keep you on your toes for the duration. A particularly sadistic sequence has you rummaging inside a corpse's innards for a key, while later on there's a pant-splitting section where you have to strike a perfect pose to open a locked door.

Melee combat is the meat of the experience, with the game's armoury built mostly of blades, pipes, chainsaws and whirling blades. And the weapons make short work of the shambling enemies, dispatching them in some gruesome displays of bloodletting. The monotony and aches of swiping set in after the first hour, and the in-game prompt to "take a break" is one best heeded. The core challenge stems from the wearing down of weapons, and often your priority is to get to the nearest sharp thing before you're throttled by one of the shuffling corpses.

The game engine delivers scale and detail with equal competence, but the overall visual similarity to AM1's *House Of The Dead* series gives you a distinct sense of playing an unused map from the franchise, minus the trigger-happy joys of lightguns and headshots. The bottom line is that *Rise Of Nightmares* isn't as engaging or exciting as AM1's established brand. It's also too adult in its content to appeal to the younger users who might enjoy its gimmicky use of Kinect (see 'Shake it all about').

With a tone somewhere between *House Of The Dead: Overkill* and *Condemned*, *Rise Of Nightmares* doesn't beg to be taken too seriously with its hackneyed script, bloody laughs and bare-bones action. The incompatibility of Kinect with AM1's ambition, however, is no laughing matter.

4



The Gunstringer

You wait ages for a novel narrative conceit and then two come along at once. Or, to be more precise, the same one comes along twice. Your progress through *The Gunstringer*, Twisted Pixel's cowboy-themed Kinect shooter, is constantly accompanied by the laconic, timeworn tones of a storyteller who fulfils much the same role as *Bastion*'s narrator.

It's a perfect fit for an on-rails shooter – the speaker's rambling stories and nuggets of background info often providing variety the game's inevitably repetitive mechanics can't. Unlike in *Bastion*, however, the narration's mostly played for laughs, the portentous tones of the speaker ("He was a one-man judge, jury and executioner on the bloody vengeance trail,") at obvious odds with the puppetry-themed carnage on screen. This is *The Gunstringer*'s other big idea – the whole thing's a puppet show, played in front of a filmed live-action audience frequently seen during cutscenes. Between them, Twisted Pixel's presentational gimmicks work hard to give *The Gunstringer* its surreal character.

The shooting, however, is more prosaic. Like *Child Of Eden*, players 'paint' their targets with a reticule before firing (though, to shoot, *The Gunstringer* opts for a slightly clearer arm-raising motion that mimes the kickback from firing a gun). There's no provision for precise aiming, and switching weapons is only possible at predefined points – though Twisted Pixel does a valiant job of wringing out what variety it can.

Levels move at a rattling place, usually starting with on-rails shooting that sees you using your non-gun hand to pull the puppet around and over obstacles. Before long it will segue into cover-based sections, side-on platforming sequences, on-rails melee battles, boss fights and more. While Kinect manages the gunplay, at times we found the puppet protagonist overly sensitive: our attempts to duck back into cover resulting in us poking his head out the other side, for instance. And the device is definitely responsible for the game's gimmickier moments: melee sequences which descend into flailing and boss fights which end in a pummelling being chief offenders.

The Gunstringer's biggest problem, however, is that it's a score-based shooter with little incentive to return. With only one weapon type available at any given time, there's none of the tactical interplay between attacks that makes aiming for high scores in *Child Of Eden* so tempting. One death attributable to Kinect rather than your abilities and you'll be switching off in frustration: Twisted Pixel obviously knows how to a spin a yarn, but this one doesn't have the staying power to become a legend of the old west.

5

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Twisted Pixel
Format 360 (Kinect only)
Release Out now



PUNCH AND SHOOTY SHOW
The Gunstringer's puppet-show conceit feels undeveloped – an extended visual gag that could have been worked in more cohesively. The idea that you're tugging strings rather than controlling your gunfighter directly simply doesn't come across, and the moments in which the player uses a fist to smash bosses are the only times in which the concept becomes tangible. The makeshift appearance of enemies and locations is a joy, however – special mention must go to the cattle made from beer cans.

As well as awarding a high score for levels as a whole, there are frequent opportunities for 'streaks' within stages as well. Nabbing a flaming taco power-up switches on a score multiplier that lasts until your character is hit



BloodRayne: Betrayal

There's a simple and pleasantly old-fashioned design principle running through the centre of *BloodRayne: Betrayal*: first, make it difficult, and then make it rewarding. So instead of a mere double-jump, you get a beautifully animated double-height backflip that you can only pull off by dashing one way, spinning on your heels, and then leaping at just the right second. Instead of health potions, you get the option to drink enemies' blood – a manoeuvre that comes with a tiny, but crucial, period of invulnerability, adding a tart strategic element to the meter management.

Forget the unintentional horrors of the past, WayForward's latest is a *BloodRayne* game in name and cast only. That said, it's not quite the *Castlevania* clone that the gothic side-scrolling and dash move suggest either. *Betrayal* rates the sheer joy of fighting over cartographic complications, and when it throws in some tricky but satisfying platform sections it feels less like exploration and more like another kind of combat: you against the environment, against wall blades, acid baths and laser-powered rafts made of corpses.

Yes, it's hard, but it's also intensely rewarding, and its few genuine sticking points – one distinctly cheap multi-wave boss fight, and a spike-ridden gauntlet that sees you pursued by a vast circular saw – are enlivened by the manner in which they force you to engage with the game's beautifully exacting controls. Controls that allow for air combos with an ideal sense of weight and collision, a knockback kick that sends a screenful of foes dropping like dominos, and a thudding revolver to get you out of the really difficult spots. Even that health system has a neat and nasty wrinkle to it: pull out of a drain move early and your enemies become toxic bombs you can set off at will, triggering waves of chained destruction if you get the timing just right.

A lot of things in WayForward's latest require that just-right mentality. *Betrayal* demonstrates exactly the kind of creative precision that shines through the developer's previous games, whether it's the jumpless speed-run platforming of *Mighty Flip Champs* or the centrifugal forces of *Mighty Milky Way*. *Betrayal*'s as pretty as you might expect – a cartoon blend of Hammer and Hellboy that's splashed into life in sooty purples and throbbing crimsons – and it has the same granite demands when it comes to mastery, with your first run-through unlikely to lift you above an F grade.

With games like Wii title *A Boy And His Blob* on its CV, WayForward is a studio with a real talent for reanimating dead IPs. In *BloodRayne*'s case, it's done enough to shake a shambling wraith out of its coffin and render it an elegant, challenging treat.

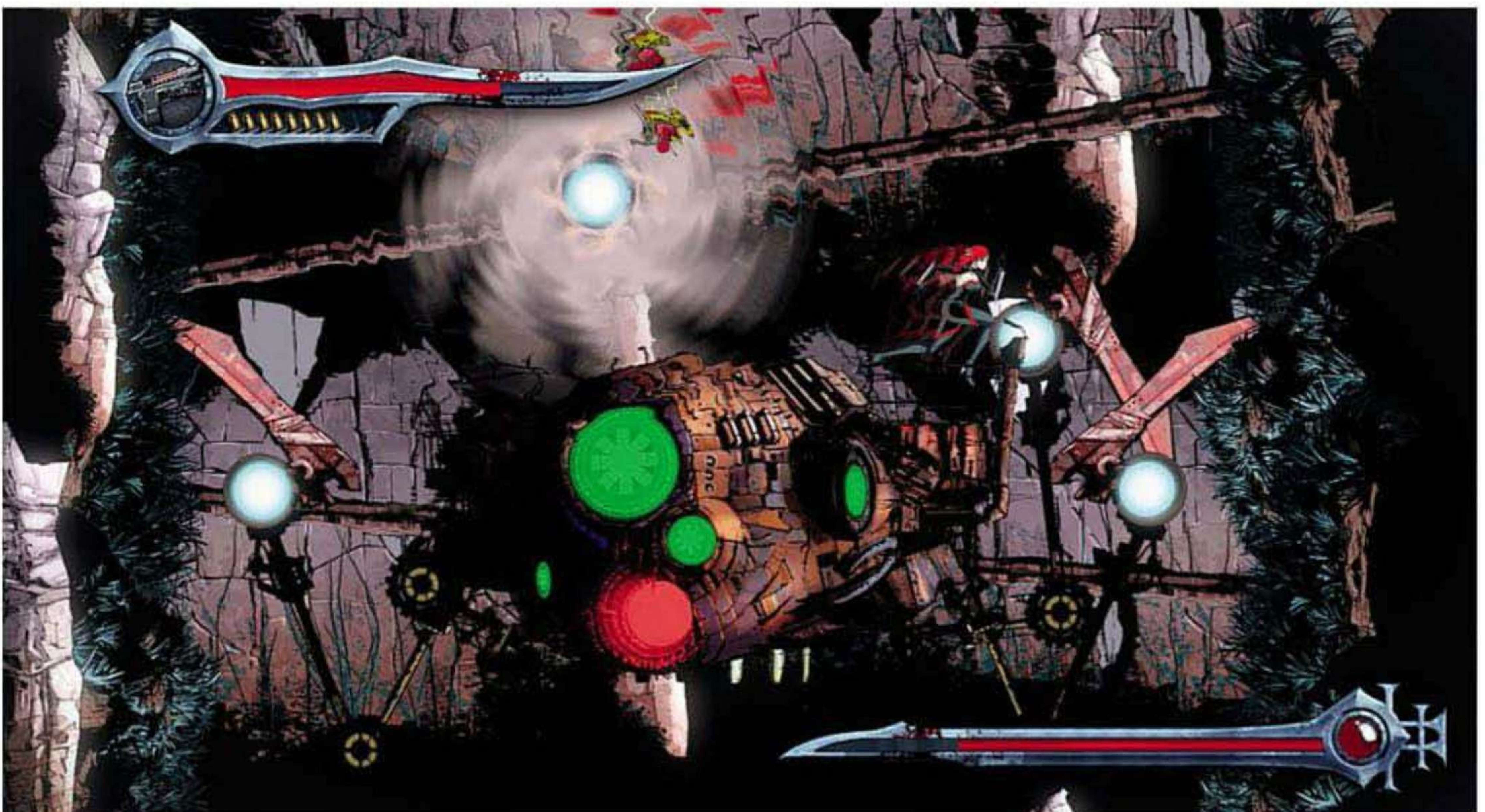
8

Publisher Majesco
Developer WayForward Technologies
Format 360, PS3
Release Out now



EXPERIMENTAL SURGERY
Health systems are becoming one of the only focal points for creativity in the standardised world of the action game, with both *Betrayal* and *Space Marine* fiddling with the internal clockwork this month. Both link regeneration to combat, but WayForward's solution is more elegant. Not only does it force you to approach your enemies as a resource as much as a threat, but it also ensures that you won't get killed during the healing animation.

Basic combos are easy, but contextual positioning allows for some delights as Rayne dishes out punishment on the left and right. Bosses, like the one below, are delights, even if they might halt progress for an hour or two



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MotoHeroz

MotoHeroz is a cuddly toy you hug to your face, only to realise a second too late it's in fact a surly porcupine. The 2D platforming racer's facade of Nintendo cheerfulness – tracks corkscrew through cartoony forest, ice, desert, water and sky environments; buggies hit the ground with a pillowy bounce; and both coins and collectibles lay tucked around each level – masks a sobering challenge that slaps you down for the tiniest imprecision.

RedLynx fans who became ragdoll physicists in the all-too-literal crash course of motocross platformer *Trials HD* will feel right at home with *MotoHeroz*. Holding the Remote in landscape orientation, you use the 1 and 2 buttons for braking and acceleration (the track occasionally coils back on itself, yet the buggies can't turn, so be ready to trundle along in reverse periodically). Sadly, instead of the spring and analogue precision of the Xbox controller's triggers, mashing the accelerator in *MotoHeroz* feels as limp as pressing an aspirin tablet through its foil sleeve. More precision is offered by the left and right buttons on the D-pad, which change your buggy's angle in mid-air to align with the surface below. If your buggy end up on its roof, a quick waggle of the Remote gives you a flip.

New buggies can be unlocked for use in party rally mode by completing the singleplayer campaign, or purchased in the store using the coins dotted around the levels. Collectable Ancestor Souls unlock pun-filled biographies

Publisher RedLynx
Developer In-house
Format Wii
Release Out now



TRICKY FINISH
MotoHeroz playfully recasts the finish line as a chequered sphere. First to touch this elusive target wins the race. Sometimes it sways back and forth on a rope; on one track it even shoots down the track away from you. Some tracks have two spheres, the trickier of which rewards you with a faster finish. Cue amusement as you watch your opponent out-race you to the sphere but misjudge the jump to reach it, after which you steal the win.

Story mode spans over 100 micro levels, and RedLynx's world-class level designers manage to deliver a steady parade of fresh ideas. In one stage you'll carry half a dozen speckled purple eggs in a basket atop your buggy. Getting them to the finish would be simple if there weren't bumps, dips and mechanical lifts bouncing you skywards along the way. One level finds you using jetpacks to rocket upward through a maze, staying just ahead of an insistently rising tide. Rope bridges sway and buckle. Underwater driving sequences feature boulder-like, drifting blowfish that can be nudged aside with enough acceleration. During your schooldays, you certainly never imagined physics could be this much fun.

Unless you're obsessive about scoring a gold-medal time on every track, a skilled player could wrap up *MotoHeroz*'s story mode in an afternoon (prepare to re-try harder levels a dozen times or more). But the unobtrusive, pun-riddled tale of Gene McQuick's quest to topple bearded rival Spider McRally merely sharpens your driving skills for the game's long-term attraction: Party Rally mode. Up to four players can compete onscreen at once, though twoplayer matches offer the best balance between vehicular slapstick and competition – four buggies jostling past obstacles can cause a series of chaotic pile-ups worthy of the coining of a new word: clusterfun.

7



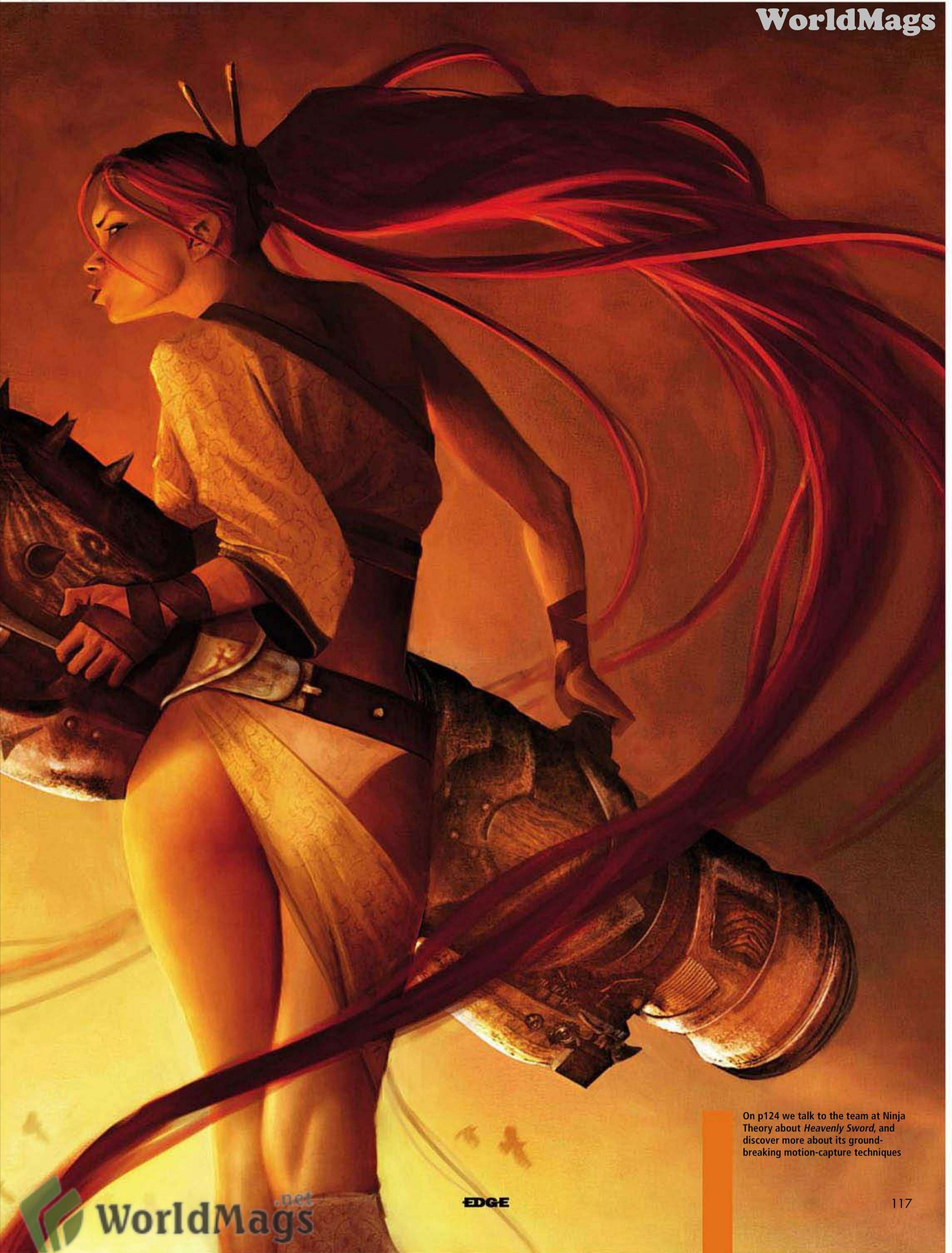
create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

In this issue's People, Places, Things starting on p118 we profile Taito's Reisuke Ishida who loves *Space Invaders* so much that he owns his own cabinet and is making new, music-infused additions to the series. On p120 we scale the walls of the castle that imprisons Ico and Yorda to discover its secrets. Arachnophobes should avoid p122, unless the idea of tearing the legs off their tormentors amuses them, as we talk to Danish studio PlayDead about the spider from *Limbo*. In Studio Profile on p124, Cambridge's Ninja Theory, developer of *Heavenly Sword* and *Enslaved* opens its doors to us to talk about how it jerry built its own in-office motion capture studio and about the sequels that never were. The subject of this month's The Making Of... on p128 is another game with a cancelled sequel, *Split Second: Velocity* the racer that dropped a jumbo jet on its players and still failed to enthral Disney, while in The Art Of... on p132 we present the stunning concepts that inspired a series that features plenty of sequels: *Halo*. Concluding this issue's Create are our regular columnists, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p138) discussing why a sense of delight in games is so important, LucasArts' Clint Hocking (p140) on why game dialogue doesn't have to be terrible, but so often is, Tiger Style's Randy Smith (p142) providing some of the rationale behind his latest game, and writer James Leach (p144) explaining why game characters are almost always clichés – it's the fault of artists and programmers.



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The business section of **Edge**'s Web site

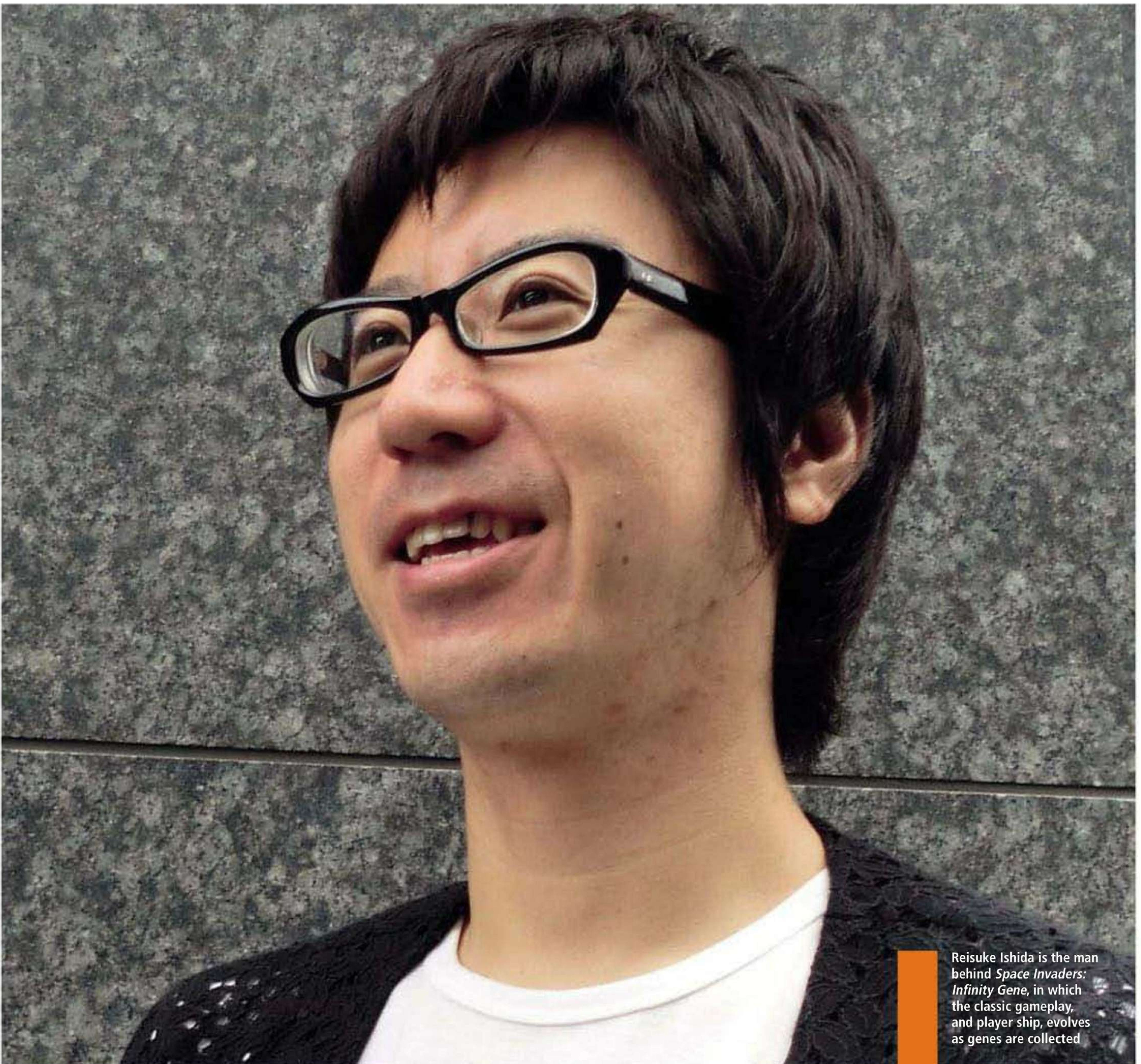


On p124 we talk to the team at Ninja Theory about *Heavenly Sword*, and discover more about its ground-breaking motion-capture techniques

People

REISUKE ISHIDA

The man behind Groove Coaster and a new wave of Space Invaders



Reisuke Ishida is the man behind *Space Invaders: Infinity Gene*, in which the classic gameplay, and player ship, evolves as genes are collected

When **Reisuke Ishida**'s *Space Invaders: Infinity Gene* released in July 2009, Taito was already a year into its reimagining of the *Space Invaders* franchise, a celebration of its 30th anniversary. Often-quirky reinterpretations of the series' iconography saw forays into realtime strategy and synaesthetic shooters.

With its design principles deeply informed by audio, *Infinity Gene*'s musicality further extends what Ishida set out to accomplish from the very start of his career. "I've spent much of my career developing cellphone games, so I'm especially preoccupied with the role of sound in games," he explains. "In Japan, mobile games are most commonly played on the train, or during quick breaks when out and about. However, in enclosed places like trains, Japanese people tend to play games on mute for fear of disturbing the people around them. So, in many cases, even if you go to the trouble of including sound in an application, it goes to waste."

Ishida's first project, *Trance Pinball*, was a Japan-only pinball game that saw the player's actions remix the techno soundtrack. Its aesthetic signature shaped Ishida's recent, popular efforts. "This was the game that established my game design style, and design concepts and some of the ways audio and graphic elements are presented found in *Trance Pinball* can still be seen in my more recent projects, *Infinity Gene* and *Groove Coaster*."

A luminous summation of his growth as a designer and figurehead, *Groove Coaster*'s *Rez*-like abstractions and cacophonous soundtrack find themselves firmly rooted in Ishida's oeuvre while going someplace he hadn't yet explored: a simple, accessible rhythm game. A fitting next step for someone who places music at the very forefront of his games.

"For me, music is one of the stars of the game. I know that most people consider it to have a secondary role, but when I structure my games there are no supporting actors. *Infinity Gene* is an extremely simple game, with no specific plot or anything, but if players were left with any sense of a narrative or worldview, I think much of that is due to the game's audio. While there may be some games specifically intended to lack audio, if you're going to include sound, it then becomes a vital, irreplaceable element in that game's composition, and it should be awarded an appropriately important role."

"From the mind of Reisuke Ishida…" *Groove Coaster*'s App Store description reads. This isn't a large, western publisher indulging the ambitions of a Japanese auteur, but rather a large, Japanese publisher putting a face to one of its flagship properties. This speaks volumes in a marketplace with a dearth of fresh, public design icons.

"I think Japan has plenty of noted designers," Ishida says. "However, I do think it's the case – especially when it comes to the more unique games – that these designers are working with themes that resonate most with Japanese players, or they're creating cellphone games intended solely for the domestic market. To western eyes I think that can certainly give the appearance of a dearth of design talent. Also – and this is unfortunate – I think companies in Japan are reluctant to put developers in the media spotlight for fear that they'll be headhunted by competitors."

Himself a huge fan of *Space Invaders* ("I even bought my own arcade cabinet"), Ishida is one of the few Japanese developers who has been allowed to supersede the stars of the franchise he mines as source material.

"The *Space Invaders* characters appear in all of my own projects without fail, and I take every chance I can get to share my enthusiasm with others. I think the higher-ups within Taito recognise this, and the success of *Infinity Gene* earned me some further credibility."

> "Space Invaders characters appear in all my projects, and I take every chance to share my enthusiasm"

However, Ishida is quick to note that the characters are not his and his alone. "While *Groove Coaster* isn't a direct descendant of *Space Invaders*, the characters do show up. I still had to go through an in-depth review and approval process, however, so it's not as if I have free rein!"

It's difficult to gauge whether Ishida's – and, accordingly, Taito's – success can be attributed to the niche his games fill in the increasingly non-niche Japanese mobile market or to the parallels between the aesthetic and creative concerns of the *Infinity Gene* titles and the successful indie endeavours they sit alongside in the App Store.

"Rather than extremely polished variations of established themes, I'm more interested in works that have a new spark or quirk, even if they're a little rough around the edges. I graduated from art college, and this is something I've always felt through my studies. Compared to other platforms, iPhone users are more likely to praise innovation and novelty. Even if a game doesn't have console-quality graphics, if the game itself is fresh, iPhone users will give it the praise it deserves."

The combination of Ishida's adventurous indie sensibility and Taito's willingness to let its developers' creativity flourish distinguish the company from other Japanese developers. The formula has allowed it to develop commercially and critically viable iOS products that play to the strengths of the platform.

"Many Japanese developers are having difficulty coping with the difference in tastes between the domestic and overseas audiences. Because of this, there's a tendency to either rely on console brands that have a proven track record overseas, or develop a title intended mainly to appeal to the Japanese audience. I think it's perfectly natural that large developers with internationally famous content will opt for a strategy that makes the most of that brand recognition, and I also think that console hits can succeed on the iPhone. However, the iPhone is one of the rare platforms where innovation is more likely to be recognised and rewarded, so I think not taking chances is a bit of a waste."

Considering the difficulties the Japanese game industry has faced recently, particularly in the handheld market with the faltering of Nintendo's 3DS, it may benefit from looking to creative mavericks such as Ishida for ways to adapt, ways to move forward while staying true to its origins.

"*Space Invaders* is no longer just a single game; it's become viewed akin to an icon representing videogame culture as a whole. It may be presumptuous of me to say this, but I want Taito to always feel pride about releasing such an important game, and remain a leading presence in the game industry."

A creative maverick as well as a company man, then. ■

CV

URL www.infinitygene.net
Softography *Trance Pinball, Spica Adventure, Nijiiro Ensoku, Elimination, Space Invaders: Infinity Gene, Groove Coaster*



Places

ICO'S CASTLE

The austere masonry of Team Ico's bastion conceals a pulsing heartbeat



Ico's horns may be considered a bad omen, but he's a good portent for Yorda, who needs his help to escape the castle

From Ico
Developer Team Ico
Origin Japan
Release 2001

Given its function as both a prison and site of ritual child sacrifice, *Ico*'s castle is disarmingly picturesque. The setting achieves balance through contrasts; dank, moss-speckled chambers open out on sunlight-warmed courtyards. Its atmosphere teeters between comforting and oppressive, the familiar and the otherworldly. Still it remains one of the most coherent game spaces ever created: providing glimpses of areas already explored and others yet to be visited, the castle's convincingly pragmatic architecture sets the imagination racing at what long-dead occupants may have used each area for. As game designers increasingly lean upon the narrative crutch of audio logs to deliver historical context, it's refreshing to explore a world in which ghosts are conjured with the most subtle design touches.

"Things that have a history just by themselves tell us so much about them from the damage and tarnish due to deterioration," the castle's real-world architect, Team Ico creative director **Fumito Ueda**, tells us. "What's appealing about that is that it evokes imagination, I think. It makes you wonder what kind of history it's got.

"I didn't want the player to think that these were levels created by designers. I wanted them to believe that beyond their screen was a castle that had existed for a very, very long time, which was built by someone they didn't know."

It's easy to fall under Ueda's spell. Here stands a crumbling ruin whose macabre purpose haunts its empty chambers, and yet the place evokes childhood trips to real castles as you clamber through disintegrating merlons and leap gaps in gangways long since reclaimed by the sea.

"We removed unnecessary objects and elements as much as possible so that everything would fit in a small space," Ueda continues. "We hated these objects that were very unnaturally placed in levels just for the sake of level design, so we removed them as well. For example, in *Ico* we don't have invisible walls that would normally prevent the player character from falling off. And when we really needed those walls, we made them look very convincing."

Though it may come as a surprise, given the obvious care invested in the castle's realisation, Ueda admits that he and his team didn't go out and scout real locations. "Everything in the game was a product of our imagination," he says. He credits the work of artists such as French etcher Gérard Trignac, who trained as an architect, as a particularly valuable source of inspiration.



Originally planned as a PlayStation game, *Ico*'s transition to PS2 allowed the team to explore techniques such as bloom lighting

The place evokes childhood trips to real castles as you clamber through merlons and leap gaps in gangways

***Ico*'s minimalist audio** design allows environmental noises to create their own emotional cues: the sea battering jagged cliffs far below; the echoing footsteps of a young boy dwarfed by high vaulted ceilings; the complaining creeks of clockwork mechanisms activated after years of dormancy; the taunting cry of birds so easily able to escape the castle's confines. So powerful is this mix of visual and aural stimuli that it manages to trigger sense memories as well. Move from the dim interiors to the gold-saturated exterior and you'll swear you can feel the sunlight hit your skin.

Less generous observers might consider the twin gatehouses – which stand at the end of long, high bridges at each side of the castle – nothing more than a thrifty reuse of assets. But whatever your take on having to navigate two near-identical spaces, their symmetry powerfully reinforces the believability of the castle.

"The castle was constructed so that hopefully the player would always be aware of its entire structure while playing the game," Ueda explains. "The architecture in *Ico* is the culmination of consistency in level and game design, and a pursuit of a perfect colour balance as well as a perfect amount of onscreen information."

The disintegrating walls and design steeped in earthy naturalism belie one developer's quest to realise perfection. The absence of mood-manipulating music or any kind of HUD further echo this approach, culminating in a virtual space which somehow feels as vivid in the memory as any real place visited – bar the odd shadow creature or explosive pot, of course. "The castle is not simply another background; we thought of it as a character," Ueda stresses. "We actually treated it with extreme caution so that Ico and Yorda wouldn't stick out."

For all its majesty, however, and talk of French artists and plausible repetition, it's Ueda's concern for gameplay, not merely architecture, that informs the castle's layout. He considers each challenge a level, and plotted the player's complex route through the castle based on the difficulty each presented, the team carefully ensuring players' experiences were balanced and consistent.

Nearly ten years after wedging that last virtual stone block in place, does Ueda wish he'd done anything differently? "I really do like the overall layout of the castle," he says confidently. "It was not possible at the time, but I would have loved to take the detail of the formative design and the background animation a lot further, and create them with a lot more detail."

In a very real sense, he will. Team Ico's upcoming game *The Last Guardian* – also set in a fortress of mysterious origin, also featuring a boy and his companion – appears to be, at the very least, a spiritual successor to *Ico*. But until then we'll happily make do with the sights, sounds and phantom sensations of *Ico*. It's not often you get to visit the remains of a castle designed by a king. ■

Things

LIMBO'S SPIDER

The scariest arachnid in gaming was also a nightmare to develop



PlayDead wanted the spider to feel woven into the game's setting, which is why it shows players a toy spider built by the other boys in *Limbo* between encounters

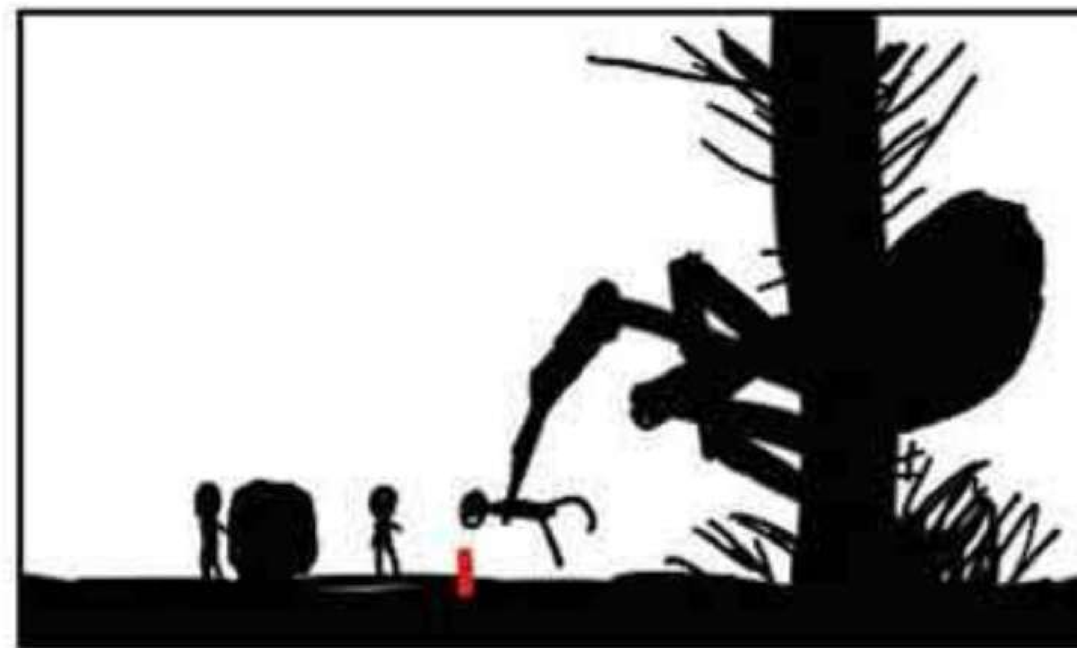
Every videogame project has a spider. Most of the time it's a metaphorical one – the hairy development challenge with eight spindly limbs that must all work in tandem. Or the game-breaking bug that keeps slinking beyond reach just as the programmer closes in to squash it dead. But games have hatched a brood of literal spiders over the years as well. The *Zelda* series is properly infested, from Gohma to *Twilight Princess*'s Armoghoma to the Skulltula twirling on her silken strand. *Gears Of War* has its leather-helmeted Corpser. Even *Minecraft* has spiders. Yet no specimen in the history of gaming epitomises both the metaphorical and literal resonance of the creepy-crawly quite like *Limbo*.

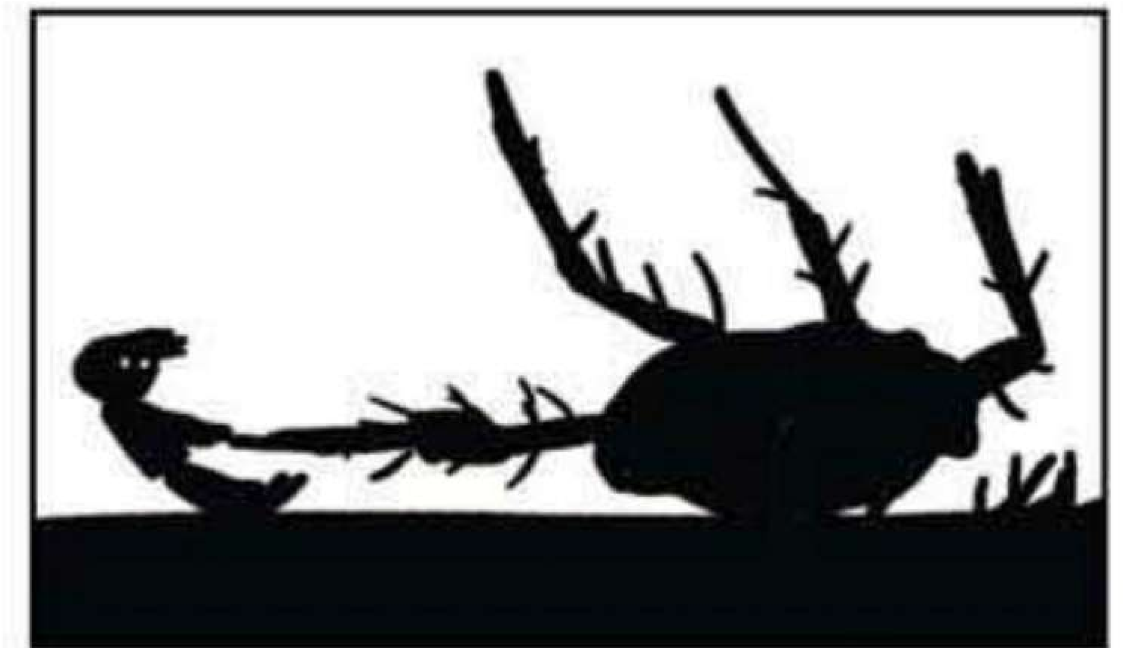
Arnt Jensen, PlayDead's founder and game director, couldn't pinpoint the moment *Limbo*'s spider appeared in his sketchbook any more than he could date-stamp the onset of his arachnophobia. Until the day he left home, he kept up his nightly bedtime ritual of scanning the room for spiders. If he spotted one, he shook his dad awake and begged him to get rid of it. "I was like 18 years old and I'd be shivering," Jensen confesses, "because I really hate spiders. And I still do, so it was very natural to confront one in the game, and kill it."

The basic outline of how *Limbo*'s boy would interact with the spider crystallised in Jensen's mind before PlayDead's founding. The boy would encounter a spider lurking behind a tree. The boy would kill the spider by systematically removing each one of its legs ("It's like being a child who pulls the legs off insects," Jensen laughs. "Some psycho children will do that"). At some point before its demise, the spider would trap the boy in a silk cocoon. The boy would wriggle free and, after a brief chase sequence, tear off the spider's final leg. Pretty straightforward, right?

"The human brain always takes the easy decision, but this was important. I insisted, we *have* to do the spider"

If only. Development progressed for a year before PlayDead's team could do anything beyond discussing the challenge of the spider in staff meetings. In addition to the early technical limitations of not having the tools to combine animation and physics, Jensen acknowledges every developer's tendency to procrastinate on features that will be gruelling to implement. "The human brain always takes the easy decision," Jensen says. "A lot of times if you have an idea that's too complicated, you just ditch it. But this was so important. I kept insisting, we *have* to do the spider in these stages."





Even Jensen's basic, early sketches of the spider encounter hint at the visual drama of *Limbo*'s monochromatic colour palette

Any other game developer would have instinctively turned the spider into a boss battle. But Jensen's aversion to videogame clichés meant the struggle between the boy and the spider couldn't fall back on glowing-orange weak spots or giant blinking eyeballs that beg to be bombarded with sharp projectiles. How was this small boy ever going to outwit a monster several times his size? The initial concept involved hunting down three pieces of gooey, sticky fruit in the tree's branches that the boy could shake to the ground below and trap the spider in. A far more grisly solution would prevail.

Level designer Peter Buchardt thought it would be funny to see the boy getting snapped in a bear trap so, on a whim, he mocked up a physics-based trap. The concept circulated around the office, sparking laughter from his colleagues. Lead gameplay designer **Jeppe Carlsen** ran with the idea, mocking up fresh puzzles with the traps, some of which even made it into the game. "We got so fond of that mechanism," Carlsen says, "we thought: 'OK, what can we use it for in a more general sense?' Then it was obvious to use it to snap the legs off the spider."

The ambient soundscape that PlayDead's Martin Stig Andersen composed for *Limbo* ensures that you feel in your spinal column the crunching snap of the spider's leg. It's remarkable the power a simple sound effect can have when it's not drowned in orchestral swells. Even if you're aware that Andersen simply recorded himself breaking a small twig between his fingers, you can't help but imagine splintering bone. To capture the sound of the spider's stabbing leg narrowly missing the boy, Andersen – who records late at night in a village outside Copenhagen to avoid the noise pollution of birds and traffic – took a spear to his son's kindergarten playground and jabbed it repeatedly into the leaf-covered topsoil. He laughs as he recounts the story, aware of how sinister it would've appeared to an uninformed observer.

The next phase of the spider sequence – the cocoon – lasts only a couple of minutes but was so labour-intensive that the staff looking after *Limbo*'s production schedule suggested on more than one occasion that it be abandoned. Jensen held firm: "It's not going anywhere; we have to get it to work." PlayDead brought on an extra programmer because the boy hopping along wrapped in spider silk runs on entirely different physics logic to the regular boy. Grumbling about the game's length from irascible members of the online community stung *Limbo*'s developers, given instances such as this where they'd invested so heavily in quality and innovation over padding.

The final chase sequence came together late in the production ("I was slightly nervous," Carlsen says). For years, *Limbo*'s arch villain remained a placeholder square with the word 'SPIDER' on it that would float along the level's geometry. This afforded the level designers the flexibility to move pieces around at will. Because the spider lacks AI, locking down those graphics too soon would require an entirely new chase animation to accommodate even the tiniest structural tweak.

The illusion of AI comes from the spider having a single dynamic leg that's detached from the rest of the animation. If the game senses that the boy has gotten too close, the spider's animation fast-forwards almost imperceptibly to align the skewering leg with the boy's body. In addition to functioning as sleight of hand, the erratic lurch reinforces the creature's unpredictability. Even while delivering a death blow such as this, the spider remains harrowingly, steadfastly mute.

"I tried to contribute to the game's sense of ambiguity," Andersen says. "I didn't want any screaming from the spider that would help to define it. Something that is silent immediately becomes more suspicious." ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Ninja Theory

How ambition, the technology behind Gollum and a passion for storytelling are driving this Cambridge developer forward



1 Flame-haired Nariko was the star of PS3 exclusive *Heavenly Sword*, released in 2007. The wuxia-inspired brawler featured landmark performance-capture work in collaboration with Weta. 2 Released in 2010, *Enslaved* was an original IP loosely based on the ancient Chinese fable Journey To The West and set in a post-apocalyptic Manhattan. Screenwriter Alex Garland and actor Andy Serkis collaborated on it. 3 Dante gets a makeover in *Devil May Cry* reboot *DmC*, the fifth game in the series

The reputation of Cambridge developer Ninja Theory rests on three core competencies: character, cinematics and action. So when Capcom decided to reboot the *Devil May Cry* franchise as *DmC* using a western developer, the hook-up with Ninja Theory made a lot of sense. "Publishers are a conservative bunch," says co-founder **Tameem Antoniades**. "They like things to be categorised. So we're the thirdperson story development team, which is fine. People know what to expect."

Unlike many British developers, Ninja Theory has so far managed to weather the economic downturn thanks in part to its decision to embark on a project featuring IP that's not its own. Housed in a business park overlooking Cambridge City's football ground, the company's main workspace – an open-plan setup with lines of desks that keep each department's key lead easily accessible at the end of their row – hums along with quiet activity. Yet across the hallway, in the other wing, its sister office looks as forlorn and deserted as Miss Havisham's dining room. It's full of empty desks, a few technical support staff and Craig Powell, an "Oxford maths genius" who's working on the studio's groundbreaking facial solver.

If things had gone to plan, this semi-deserted office should have been full to capacity, staffed by a team working on *Enslaved 2*, while development on *DmC* happened across the hallway. But *Enslaved*, an original IP based on a Chinese fable, didn't find the audience Ninja Theory or publisher Namco Bandai anticipated. An ill-conceived demo and a marketing campaign that failed to push the title much beyond UK shores both took their toll.

It was a great shame, not least of all because *Enslaved*'s groundbreaking performance-capture work helped create that rarest of things – a cinematic videogame with a story and characters players cared about. "*Enslaved* should have done better," Antoniades admits. "Right now we should have been doing a sequel and perfecting that sequel and doing what franchises do, which is get better over time. [But] because that didn't happen we've not expanded to two teams like we intended to. So we've remained a smaller shop. But now we get another chance with *DmC*." No one says it, but the abiding impression is that Ninja Theory has everything riding on Dante's radical makeover being a success.

Ninja Theory launched in 2000 as Just Add Monsters, a startup founded by Antoniades, **Mike Ball** and **Nina Kristensen**. They met at Sony Cambridge and founded JAM with their savings and no investment. At first they operated out of the spare room in Ball's house. "It was a proper startup," Antoniades says. "Even the PCs we had weren't powerful enough to run any code, really. It was truly ground-up, scary."

After Argonaut Software acquired JAM (Jez San, Argonaut's former CEO, remains a non-executive director at Ninja Theory), Microsoft Game Studios signed its first title, the Xbox brawler *Kung Fu Chaos*, in 2003. Despite the company growing to half a dozen employees, the contrast in scale between developer and publisher couldn't have been more pronounced. "When Microsoft came and did their due diligence on us, they sent 12 people!" Kristensen recalls with a smile.

Following Argonaut's bankruptcy in 2004, Just Add Monsters went through a management buyout and renamed itself Ninja Theory. Its first title was *Heavenly Sword*, a PS3 title inspired by the wuxia-style fight films of the Far East.

"Enslaved should have done better. Right now we should have been doing a sequel and perfecting it"

"We decided that we'd do the next big thing and make our mark on the industry, so we came up with the idea of *Heavenly Sword* before the PS3 or Xbox 360 even existed," Kristensen explains. "We started developing on high-end PCs and Mike [Ball] kept an ear to the ground about what was coming, what the architecture was going to be, and what the specs would be, while trying to design the game to what we thought it should be. It was a bit of a challenge actually placing the title. No one knew what a next-gen title should be at that time. So were we too ambitious? Not ambitious enough? Genuinely, no one knew."

Although the team had a build of the game running on early Xbox 360 devkits, it was Sony that recognised the project's value in showcasing next-generation tech and signed it as a PS3 exclusive. Collaborating with Weta Digital and actor Andy Serkis – both parts of the team that had brought Gollum to life in the Lord Of The Rings movies – Ninja Theory set a new benchmark for game character animation. Weta's use of full-performance capture (face and body capture, with multiple actors in a single scene) was also an industry first. It drew appreciative murmurs from many, including James Cameron who was at the time prepping Avatar.



***Enslaved*'s poor sales disappointed both Ninja Theory and publisher Namco Bandai. A mooted sequel was put on hold**



Founded 2004
Employees 100
Key staff Tameem Antoniades (co-founder, chief creative ninja), Mike Ball (co-founder, chief technical ninja), Nina Kristensen (co-founder, chief development ninja), Stuart Adcock (technical art director), Alessandro Taini (visual art director)
URL www.ninjatheory.com
Selected softography *Kung Fu Chaos, Heavenly Sword, Enslaved*
Current projects *DmC*

Heavenly Sword's landmark status did Ninja Theory few favours – proof that pioneers are often the guys with arrows (or in this case shurikens) in their backs. After the title failed to break even at retail, Sony abandoned plans for a sequel and the studio almost went under. Yet its enthusiasm for story-driven games was hard to kill.

Two oversized heads stand guard proudly in Ninja Theory's reception. Constructed from battered metal, the pieces were originally left in the office by Antoniades's uncle, a sculptor. That was six years ago, and they're still waiting for him to reclaim them. In the meantime, the angular heads sit surrounded by concept art and figurines from *Heavenly Sword* and *Enslaved*. They're fitting totems for a development studio where characters and facial details remain vitally important.

"We're in the leftfield that's close to cinema," says Ball when asked about the company's focus. "We're developing a particular style of game: emotional storytelling, high action." It's taken Ninja Theory far from most developers' comfort





There's not a single pizza box in sight on the break room bar (left) – at least not at this point in the development of the studio's latest action game, *Devil May Cry* reboot *DmC* (above). It's the first time Ninja Theory has worked on a franchise that it didn't originate in-house

zones. One day the office might host a film historian screening Strangers On A Train followed by a seminar on camera angles; another day might see Andy Serkis and screenwriter Alex Garland sharing a ride in a lift.

But there's no Hollywood glitz here. In fact, it's endearingly no-frills. The main meeting room doubles as an incidental mo-cap studio where pick-ups can be shot long after the shoots in LA at House Of Moves (*Enslaved*) or Giant Studios (*DmC*) have wrapped. Invariably these pick-up sessions involve one of the dev team vaulting about the meeting room in Spandex, much to the amusement of their colleagues. The self-built mo-cap cameras that sit in each corner of the room aren't even prohibitively expensive. "Cheap as chips," Kristensen boasts cheerfully.

When you're David, not Goliath, innovation and DIY skills often go hand in hand. When Ninja Theory learned that head-mounted facial-capture cameras would cost several thousand pounds a day to rent, Ball and technical art director Stuart Adcock went out and bought a cricket helmet and some webcams. They constructed a facial-capture rig for under £100.

Not content with just jury-rigging cameras, the studio has also put together its own tools. Unable to afford Weta's expensive facial solver – a system that reads the markers on an actor's face and mathematically calculates the best combination of facial muscles to use on a virtual character to interpret their expressions – Ninja Theory set out to build its own.

"I think we're definitely on the cutting edge, whether for movies or games, in terms of solving facial expressions," Antoniades claims. For a British videogame developer to be competing in the same arena as major movie VFX houses like Weta and Digital Domain demonstrates incredible chutzpah.

Yet Ninja Theory has no plans to follow *Heavy Rain* developer Quantic Dream and build its own performance-capture studio, preferring instead to maintain close ties to Hollywood. Antoniades visited the set of Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes to watch Weta's ever-evolving performance-capture process at work, while *DmC*'s shoot at Giant Studios let the team benefit from the latest advancements in a rapidly moving sector.

"When Spielberg goes to Giant he says he wants to shoot things in a certain way and they have to build this whole bunch of technology," Antoniades explains. "If they're doing six movies a year, they've half a dozen thrusting reasons to upgrade and push forward the technology. If we had our own studio, we'd be upgrading maybe once a year. Having a little studio for pick-ups and a head-mounted camera for voiceover sessions just lets us fill in the gaps."

"Even some experienced game designers I've worked with think story should never be in games"

Despite its strong aesthetic and admirable pluck, Ninja Theory still hasn't had the breakout hit it deserves. Partly it's because the developer faces the dilemma of all creatives: it's caught between a desire to innovate and the more conservative demands of the market in which it operates. *Heavenly Sword* and *Enslaved* both deserved sequels, yet neither sold enough for the team to build on those original IPs.

It's easy to understand Ninja Theory's frustration. *Enslaved* wrapped its gameplay around a surprisingly nuanced love story, but was criticised by some for being too short and too insistent on handholding. What's more, it deliberately reduced the skill needed to traverse its platforming sections in order to prioritise a different journey: the emotional odyssey of its characters. It wasn't a decision that found favour right across the gameplaying landscape. "Merely mentioning the concept of story is sacrilege [to some hardcore gamers] because [they believe] games should not have stories," Antoniades says. "Even some experienced game designers I've worked with in the industry think story should never be in games. It's the kind of viewpoint that's damaged other media."

In the blockbuster game sphere, Ninja Theory's unusual approach sits uneasily with the price-points needed to make such a high-end title pay its way. "I wish games were sold at DVD-style prices and were smaller experiences in general," Antoniades says. Until that happens, Ninja Theory finds itself trapped between its desire to push boundaries and the need to satisfy a demanding audience expecting a game costing £40 to tick a lot of traditional gameplay boxes.

Maybe that explains why there's a small but vocal minority of gamers virulently opposed to Ninja Theory. Some people, it seems, feel aggrieved by the developer's apparent arrogance in daring to marry gameplay and character-driven storytelling. "I think we've been gaining fans but we've also been gaining violent hatred from small groups of people that has been built up over time," Antoniades says. "I'm kind of bemused by it. I was upset about it before, but not any more. It's kind of bizarre."

When Capcom signed Ninja Theory to reboot the *Devil May Cry* franchise, the vitriol reached boiling point. The first teaser trailer triggered an online backlash, in part because Dante's hairdo had changed, but also due to fear that the story-focused studio will be unable to develop a combat system worthy of the series. However, walking around Ninja Theory's offices and looking at screens and concept art from the game – all heavily veiled in NDA secrecy – it's obvious that Ninja Theory's key strengths of cinematics and character could be a perfect fit for the franchise.

If Dante's reboot finally offers Ninja Theory a financial as well as critical hit, where might it go next? "The future's an open book at this moment," Ball says. "But I think whatever we do next you'll always be able to look at it and go: 'That's a Ninja Theory product'." True success will mean more than just profits. It'll also give this underrated British developer the freedom to take its vision to the next level and fill up that empty office. ■

Q&A



Tameem Antoniades
Co-founder and chief creative ninja, Ninja Theory

Of the three founders of Ninja Theory, Tameem Antoniades is by far the most recognisable. The soft-spoken chief creative director is the company's point man and its public face. Having worked as a game programmer and designer at Millennium Interactive and Sony Cambridge, he left to co-found Ninja Theory progenitor Just Add Monsters in 2000. He remains a committed film buff, though he says his obsession with bad kung fu movies has thankfully ended.

What have your experiences been like working with different publishers?
They've all varied very much. They've all been completely different. Some of them actively tell you what people want to play – they do their market research and tell you. Others say: "You're the guys who know what you're doing, so just do it". Microsoft's useability is outstanding. The idea that you can continuously playtest your game, have psychologists analysing how people play your game and giving the team feedback to let you act on it… I thought it was a revolution in development. I thought it would roll out across the entire industry, because it's probably the best way a publisher can guarantee that a developer can make their game better. That hasn't happened, though. With other publishers you still have to fight to convince them that playtesting throughout development is a good thing to do and worth the money.

How is your approach to the performance capture pipeline changing?
The main thing is we're trying to make things happen quicker and more efficiently. We're trying to squash it all together so our editor and assistant editor are on set and we're capturing the filming cameras – the physical motion of them on set. That means when we're done with the shoot we lock the edit and the cameras are already done. It just makes everything quicker, shorter, and probably a little cheaper.

Is *DmC* make-or-break for Ninja Theory?
I think every game is make-or-break. *Kung Fu Chaos* was make-or-break. If we didn't sign that project we would have gone down. If we didn't release it on time we would have gone down. Same with *Heavenly Sword* – that was make-or-break too. Argonaut, who owned us, went down as we were developing it, and we had two months to sign it otherwise we would have run out of money and disappeared. We didn't break even on *Heavenly Sword* and, because Sony didn't want a sequel from us, we were left in the lurch with no project.

Since we were exclusive, we couldn't come up with a project under exclusivity that wasn't owned by Sony. That put us in a very bad situation and we nearly lost the company again. Then we got *Enslaved* signed and we started *DmC* [during *Enslaved*'s development], so we were no longer on those wild swings of insecurity. So things are more secure now, but equally one bad project can sink a developer, it really can.





Ninja Theory's first-floor meeting room overlooks Cambridge City FC's pitch, and could double as an executive box for football-loving dev staff

THE MAKING OF…

Split Second: Velocity

Black Rock Studio's street racer was a brilliant destruction derby, but it couldn't stop the British developer from crashing





Rather than tussle with car manufacturers over damage, the team looked to big American muscle cars and NASCAR racer designs for inspiration

Publisher Disney Interactive
Developer Black Rock Studios
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin UK
Release May 2010

Most racing games revel in car porn. Sunlight glinting off the bodywork of a Lamborghini Gallardo LP as it races to the front of the pack in *Gran Turismo 5*, the throb of raw horsepower under the hood of a Toyota AB-Flug Supra in *Forza Motorsport 2*. *Split Second* is different. Here the cars aren't designed to be drooled over and modded. They're designed to be blown up.

Black Rock Studio's high-concept, high-octane arcade racer came with an eye-catching brief. "Imagine if Michael Bay and Jerry Bruckheimer got together to do a street racing TV show," explains game director **Nick Baynes**. In keeping with those filmmakers' rep for explosive spectacle, the game wasn't about racing as much as it was about crashing. Extravagantly.

The game frames its levels as seasons of a near-future, primetime reality-TV series. The world's best stunt drivers compete against each other on specially designed tracks rigged with pyrotechnics. Complementing this is the game's unique mechanic – Power Plays that trigger epic destructive moments capable of taking out rival drivers and even radically remoulding the track. It helps turn *Split Second* into a striking hybrid: two parts Death Race to one part The Running Man.

At Black Rock's Brighton studio, the team decided that nothing was too extreme. Buildings collapsing, trains derailing on to the road and helicopter gunships raining down missiles. If it crashes, burns or blows up, it deserved a place in *Split Second*'s catalogue of wanton destruction. Everyone was happy, even the publisher. Or at least they were until they saw the belly-flopping plane.

The genesis of *Split Second* stretches back to 2004. In those days Black Rock was known as Climax Racing (it was later renamed after its acquisition by Disney in 2006). After working on several racers, the team came up with a pitch for a new game, featuring environmental destruction, called *Driving Storm*. Over a year before the first *MotorStorm* was announced, and seven years before the devastation of *MotorStorm: Apocalypse* was unleashed, the mooted game focused on racing through extreme weather and natural disasters.

"The core concept was it was a racing game with an evolving track," Baynes remembers. "The original fiction was that you were in the middle of a natural disaster. You were part of a group of thrill-seeking drivers who were heading into the disaster zone as everyone else was leaving it." There were tsunamis, earthquakes and even a volcano popping up in the streets of New York. Yet it turned out several developers were pitching exactly the same idea to various publishers simultaneously. "The 360 and PS3 were about to launch, and I think the hardware was just right to help visualise that kind of destructive environment."



Design director Paul Glancey (left) worked on *Burnout* and *Black* before *Split Second*. Art director Steve Uphill (right) adds *Lotus Challenge* and *MS Train Simulator* to a similar CV

Driving Storm was shelved until 2007, when the studio's new owner Disney Interactive asked if Black Rock had any ideas for street racers. Although Disney was concerned about the prospect of using natural disasters as the game's selling point – it fretted that another hurricane like Katrina could derail the release – it was sold on *Driving Storm*'s destructive, interactive tracks.

"People want to see what's going to explode next, what's going to collapse on their opponent next"

"Disney was keen to get away from being just the Tinkerbell games company at the time," says *Split Second*'s design director **Paul Glancey**. "They wanted to get into the boy's market, which is why Black Rock was such a good purchase for them."

Out of that kernel grew *Split Second*, which was initially (and rather more prosaically) called *Race Against The World*. It was an arcade racer in which triggering destruction was more important than changing gear. Driving around the TV show's specially constructed tracks that had been rigged with explosives, players earned Power Play points by drifting, drafting and jumping. With the power meter charged, they could unleash set-pieces on their rivals, from simple diversions like dumper trucks dropping their loads to explosions that would send an air traffic control tower crashing on to the track. Car wreck animations and explosive VFX turned each set-piece into the equivalent of a Hollywood movie stunt.

Shunning the conventional wisdom of other arcade racers at the time, Black Rock designed *Split Second* for maximum carnage. "In a racer, it's normally the cars that are the stars," explains the game's art director **Steve Uphill**. "But we were making a racing game that was about the world. It was something that I put in my art style guide: the world is the star, not the car. In *Split Second*, people want to see what's going to explode next, what's going to collapse on their opponent next. That's what made it unique."

Game development can often feel like a race: you rev up the engine, negotiate twists and turns, and then make a mad dash for the finish line. On *Split Second*, unfortunately, the experience amounted to a series of false starts. Since the world was so integral to the gameplay experience, creating each environment became a labour of love. Tracks would take up to four months to build, around twice as long as a conventional racing game's environments, as the team had to plan not only the laps but also the explosive trigger points.

"I'd worked on previous racing games like *Burnout*, which were really simple," says Uphill. "You'd just design a track and off you'd go. But here art and design were so closely linked. With most games you can make design give you a grey box and then, to some degree, art have a free reign to do what they want inside that grey box. But I've never done anything like this. It was chicken and egg: what comes first?"

The first 18 months of production were part of a steep learning curve, and several prototype tracks and set-piece Power Plays – including a level crossing with a whistling train barrelling out of a tunnel – ended up being scrapped. The problem was that early tracks simply didn't convey the necessary cinematic spectacle. For a Power Play to work, events needed to happen far enough in front of the player that they had time to enjoy them and react, but close enough to thrill. Early game builds had explosions happening so far down the road ahead of the player that there was little to see. It was disappointing.

"It was like: 'C'mon guys, we have to do something here otherwise it's not going to have any spectacle!'" Uphill remembers. "We had to design Power Plays so there was always lots of stuff flying over the road and player. It has no gameplay connotations at all, it's pure smoke and mirrors. We did that in quite a lot of the Power Plays. If you cut it down to the core mechanic, it's actually miles down the road. Everything that happens prior to it is just eye candy."

Integrating the set-pieces into the gameplay was more demanding than anyone expected. "To do something like the collapsing tower," explains Glancey, "we realised there were a lot of components involved beyond just collapsing the tower itself. You had to put it on a fairly long stretch of road, so the player could get good visibility on it; and have a good run up to it, so that even if they were going at 160mph they could see it falling. You had to get the animation, the artwork and the track all around it right. We didn't want the game to feel like a QTE where you press the button and what happens looks like a foregone conclusion."

To accommodate the development challenges, the team was split into small sub-groups with a coder, animator, artist and designer working on each track and its Power Plays from the ground up. Along with the streamlined production pipeline, the team discovered a series of tricks for maximising the excitement. "Making the earlier tracks taught us a lot of things," says Baynes. "For example, we learned to put in a hairpin corner before a really big moment, so we could slow the players' cars down and have more control over their speed as they approached the set-piece." Meanwhile, Uphill and his presentation team designed a minimalist HUD that de-cluttered the screen completely, emphasising the game's cinematic appeal (Disney liked the new HUD, tucked away under the car's wheels, so much that it patented it).

The other concern to emerge affected racing's very foundation: angling to get ahead of the pack. In *Split Second*, though, holding a leading position complicated the Power Play mechanic. "Generally the biggest issue we always had in prototypes and in getting the core gameplay working was what to do when you're out in front," says Baynes. "We suddenly found that if you're winning the race, there was nothing you could do. There was no one in front of you to trigger the Power Plays on. That was a really big challenge and led us to do more animations that left debris on the track, so that even if you were in the lead there were still obstacles for you to navigate."

It also meant a reliance on rubber-banding, that old racing genre cheat that gives AI-controlled vehicles the ability to catch up with the player. "*Split Second* without cars around you isn't much fun," Baynes continues. "We had to keep the pack much closer together. We had to make sure the cars always felt like they were keeping pace with you, or were holding back enough for you to keep up with them without breaking the fiction."

While most players tend to rail against banding as an unrealistic cheat, Baynes reckons it was essential given *Split Second*'s unique gameplay. "When it works well, that's one of the things that led to such intense races. Positions changed a lot as you went from first to third to second to first. There were a lot of on-the-line finishes where an explosion takes an opponent out and lets you win the race at the last moment. That real split-second timing – pardon the pun – helped intensify the experience."

Q&A



Nick Baynes
Game director, formerly of Black Rock Studio

What makes *Split Second* so unique?
I still don't think anyone to date has made anything the scale of *Split Second*, at the speed of *Split Second*. That's the key thing. Firstperson action games have epic moments that are just as big as anything in *Split Second*, but they're normally done at walking pace. We were doing it at a couple hundred miles an hour.

The game never appears to slow down. Is that something you aimed for?
We really made sure that the game never drops frames. If the game was going to slow down that would affect the handling of the car and you need that handling to be there to avoid the objects that are being thrown at you. Originally we wanted to go at 60fps. Ideally, in our opinion, a racing game should be at 60fps. But very early on we decided we'd rather have a game locked at 30fps that captured that Hollywood experience rather than a game that ran at 60fps but only had half the VFX. It wouldn't have been the same experience.

Did anything prove too extreme?
We had a camera shake that was affected by the explosions. It was an amazing experience, because it really did feel super-cinematic. It was really, really intense but we had to dial it back. If we'd been doing a coin-op – a three minute experience – it would have been great. But to sit and play it for hours with the camera dialled up that much became quite a stressful experience!

The irony that this explosive, Hollywood-inspired carmaggedon would have 'Disney' stamped on the box wasn't lost on anyone at Black Rock, especially when it came to the airport track's crashing plane. It was an outrageous moment: a fat-bellied cargo plane pitching on to the tarmac and skidding towards you in a shower of sparks and black smoke.

"I thought I was going to lose my job over that one," says Uphill, laughing but deadly serious. "It's Disney, right? Mickey Mouse and fairytales, and there was me proposing to put a crashing plane in there." The plane became something of a sticking point with the publisher, and the team went through several variations to try and make it less controversial. "We put 'CARGO' on all the planes so people didn't think we were blowing up loads of passengers," remembers Glancey. One version of the aircraft was even painted blue with a pink stripe to reduce its realism.

Fortunately, when Baynes showed the game to The Walt Disney Co head Bob Iger during a quarterly report, the CEO laughed off the carnage and told his concerned aides to chill out: "It's just a primetime TV show." As Baynes puts it, "That fiction actually let us get away with a lot more than we thought we would".

When Black Rock unveiled *Split Second* at E3 in 2009, it was the plane crash that left the audience picking their jaws off the floor. Disney was convinced it had a hit new IP on its hands. Amid talk of a theme park ride tie-in and a line of Hot Wheels-style toy cars, the publisher decided to fast-track the game for a pre-World Cup release in July. But, hitting shelves on the same day as *Red Dead Redemption* and in the same window as *Blur* (another, very different, destruction derby), *Split Second* never clocked up the sales numbers it deserved.

For Disney Interactive, already preparing to abandon the console games market, the disappointing sales reinforced its new strategy of concentrating on mobile, tablet and Facebook games. Nascent plans for a sequel (see 'Fuel injection') were quietly shelved.

The company announced the closure of Black Rock in July of this year and many of the core team went to new pastures: Baynes now heads up RoundCube Entertainment and Uphill co-founded ShortRound Games. Glancey had already moved to Ubisoft Reflections, where he worked on *Driver: San Francisco*. "It was a terrible shame," says Uphill, "because the *Split Second* team were super-talented. In the words of Disney, they really made magic happen."

Before the studio's dismantling, Black Rock valiantly tried to strip back *Split Second* and align it with Disney's new focus. "We investigated whether we could maybe do a scaled down version that would fit with the new market dynamics," says Baynes. "But to do a *Split Second* that's in any way constrained or scaled down, it's not really *Split Second* any more." It would be like asking Michael Bay to make an intimate character drama and, unsurprisingly, the idea never gained traction. Black Rock may be gone and sadly missed, but its explosive racer offers quite a parting gift to players who see *Split Second*'s crashing, skidding cargo plane not as a units-sold metaphor, but the stunning feat of videogame magic that it is. ■



Renders for *Split Second 2* (left) see an increased level of driver detail ready for its on-foot sections

Fuel injection

Although never officially greenlit by Disney, a *Split Second* sequel was apparently in the pipeline at Black Rock before its demise.

Plans for the game stayed rooted in the TV show fiction with a behind-the-scenes story involving drivers and technicians set the day before the show aired. This time, Black Rock planned to vary the gameplay a bit more. Players would be able to pilot helicopters and even ditch their cars to explore the environments at a slower pace.

One prototype map revisited the power plant from the original game, only now flooded for boat chases. Pedestrian sections could have seen players priming the Power Plays and trying to prevent sabotage. They aimed to deliver the explosive gameplay of the original, but with more variety. "We also wanted to give a bit more context to why you were doing things." But with Disney's focus shifting, and the racing genre struggling, it wasn't to be," says Baynes.

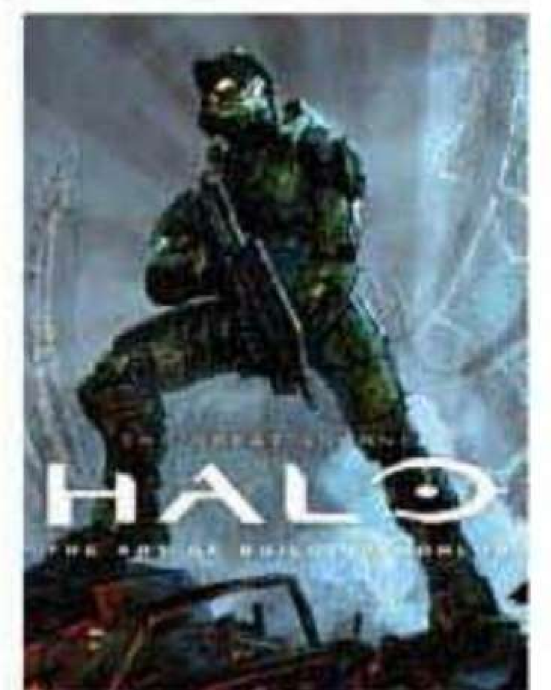


Concept art for the Canyon level shows a dam blowing up. In the game this is accompanied by klaxons and a watery cascade

THE ART OF…
Halo

Exploring the concepts behind one of gaming's most beloved playgrounds





For the book cover, concept artist Eddie Smith's design "was going to be for a poster that depicts the Chief in a 'last stand' sort of pose that evokes the term 'Finish The Fight.' So I tried to come up with something iconic, almost statue-like"

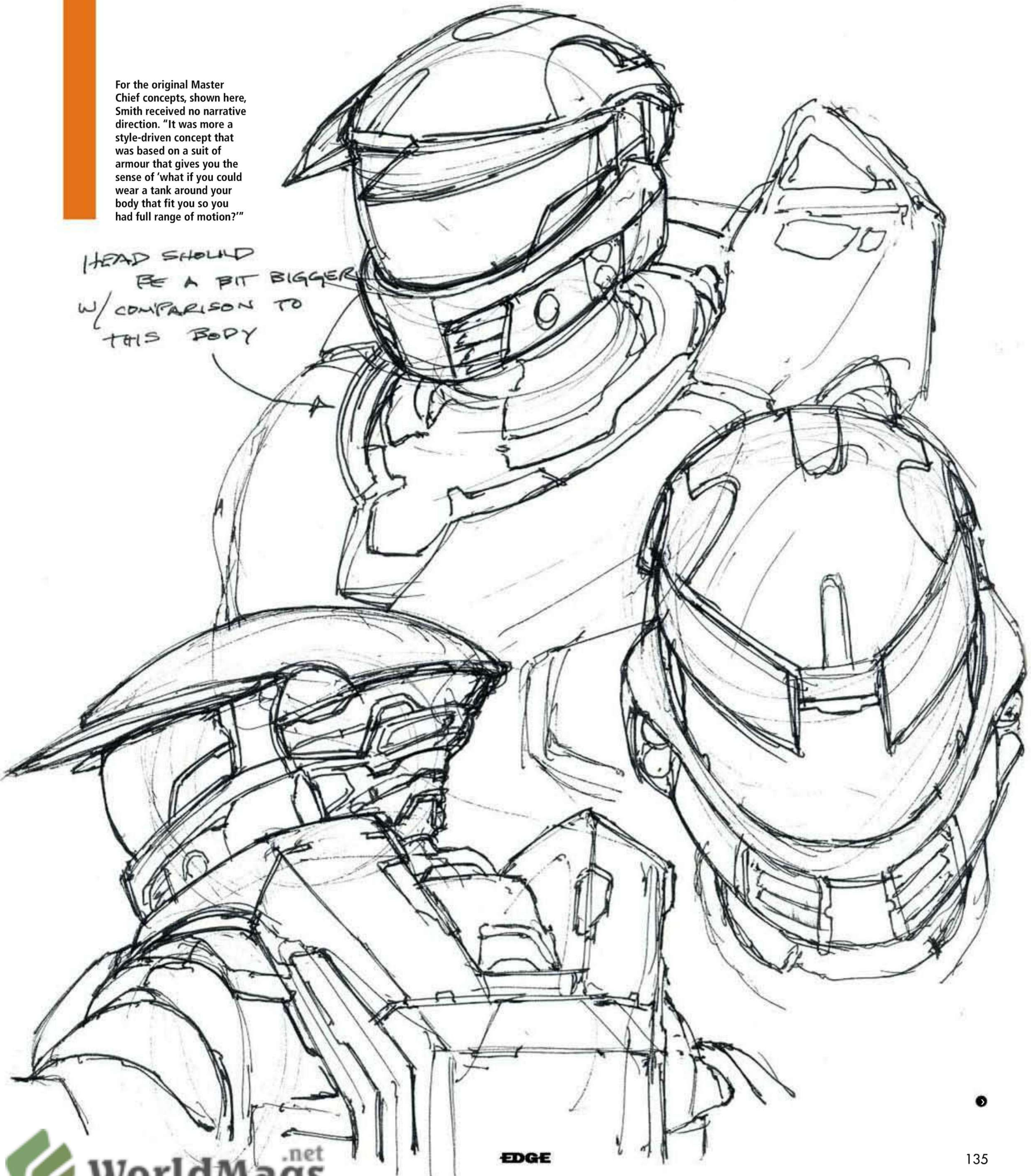
Halo was never just about the armour-clad saviour Master Chief; it was about a galaxy in dire need of saving, and richly imagined enough to seem worth the effort. The upcoming art book Halo: The Art Of Building Worlds (published by Titan Books and out next month) compiles nearly 200 pages of the vivid paintings and sketches that would form the look and feel of the series. *Halo*'s art direction has always worked hard to preserve a sense of nature and humanity, to balance its more cartoonish purple-and-green sci-fi indulgences, and these choices keep a human pulse ticking away beneath the surface. On the eve of the release of *Halo Anniversary* (see p76) we look at some of the book's choicest samples and hear from the people who gave life to the vision.



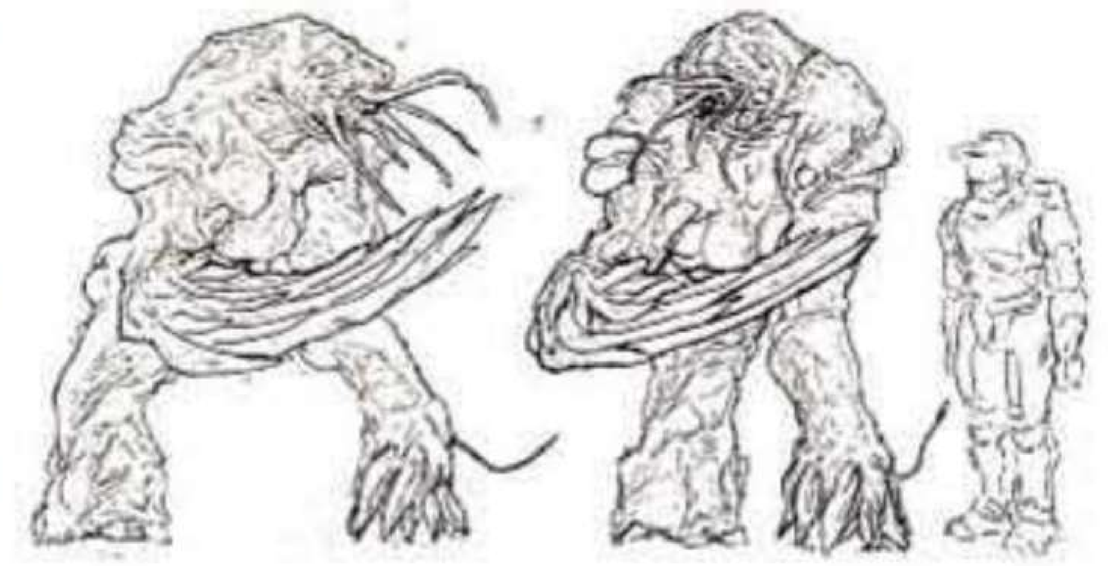
The Master Chief hunkers down behind the frankly rather tenuous cover of a Warthog as a giant Covenant Scarab prepares to fire its head-mounted plasma beam in a scene Eddie Smith was directed by fellow Bungie artist Lorraine McLees to illustrate

The Spartan laser (top) and sniper rifle (middle) will be familiar to *Halo* players. The grenade launcher (above) was never used

For the original Master Chief concepts, shown here, Smith received no narrative direction. "It was more a style-driven concept that was based on a suit of armour that gives you the sense of 'what if you could wear a tank around your body that fit you so you had full range of motion?'"







O'Connor: "With *Halo Anniversary* in particular, the challenge for Eddie Smith, Ben Cammarano and the art team was to respect the original look and feel of the game, pay homage to it, but still provide something different enough to warrant a press of the 'back' button [to change to the original graphics engine], otherwise there would be a twofold problem – one, why not just play the original, and two, what is the artistic challenge set to the lighting and texture artists other than slavishly aping the original? You don't get good work from forgery, so something original had to be poured in, alongside new technology. And the drive for that happened, naturally enough, at the concepting stage."





"*Halo* concept art has always been more than simply pointing the 3D and tech artists in a vague or general direction," says 343 Industries director Frank O'Connor. "It's been about capturing the desired look, atmosphere and scale of the events, characters and scenarios. *Halo* eschews a glitteringly realistic aesthetic in favour of a more painterly, richly layered look and the resulting skyboxes, environments, vehicles and creatures often look not just practically but texturally like the original concept images. Naturally, this creates a set of tasks and challenges that artists and engineers have to approach from either literal or philosophical avenues. It's fun to go through old *Halo* concept art and see just how closely it mapped to the types of images eventually recreated as 3D art."

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Delight, and its power to change the game

A while ago someone sent me an amazing YouTube link. It described a challenge called Tower to Tower, in which *Halo* fans would use grenades and warthogs to leap to the top of a tower, then use more of the same to leap across an immense gap between it and another tower. The challenge was to complete this second leap and stay alive.

The video (set to Don't Stop Believing by Journey) showed many attempts and the eventual completion of the challenge, a full seven years after it had originally been conceived.

It's an epic example of the same sort of drive that leads players to try to reach *Donkey Kong*'s kill screen, master all combos in *Killer Instinct*, or any one of a thousand unrecorded feats of skill. You might roll your eyes and chalk up that sort of drive to the obsessive nature of a few players, but I think that's the wrong lesson to learn. Instead, consider it as a lesson in the power of delight.

Professor Noriaki Kano created a model of customer satisfaction that described how all attributes of any product could be separated into three types: Threshold, Linear or Delightful.

A threshold attribute is one that the audience considers to be mandatory, while a linear attribute is one that is considered an upgrade. To the FPS player, the ability to strafe is a threshold attribute, while a better rocket launcher is a linear attribute. Over time, linear attributes tend to become threshold attributes, and so developing more linear attributes describes most kinds of innovation. Most developers use this approach. If I create a WWII shooter, then you create a better one. If you invent a physics-based puzzler, I create a similar one. If you create a racing game with crash zones on the cars, I make a slightly shinier one.

Whole genres have developed in this manner, acquiring the various trappings of convention and being pushed along by developers out-innovating each other incrementally. Indeed, the drive for higher fidelity in graphics is possibly the greatest example of outdoing the competition bit by bit.

Delightful attributes are different: they substantially increase satisfaction. In games, this translates to the sudden experience of the unexpected in the expected. The game that genuinely scares, surprises, amuses, inspires or impresses in a way that you just didn't see coming is high on the delightful scale. One of the delightful attributes in *Halo*, for example, was the comical robustness of the physics. You could stick grenades to people, sit in warthogs and be blown around yet survive. You could even discover that the tops of those towers were really there and not some boring border to the world. Plenty of FPSes have vehicles, grenades and fancy weapons, but *Halo* made feats like Tower to Tower possible.



The drive for higher fidelity in graphics is possibly the greatest example of outdoing the competition bit by bit

Delight is not the same thing as achievement. The social and mobile gaming industries tend to describe games as click-reward engines where badges and achievements are inherently delightful, but this misses the point (by about a mile). Achievements are simply rewards doled out for completing tasks set by the game, and badges are a visual representation of that. They're fun (depending on the game) but expected. They could be described as a linear attribute at best, perhaps broadening the game out in small directions or adding a bit of structure.

Delight is much more personal than that. It comes from two sources. The first is the game engine. The player discovers an unexpected strategy, a way to use the physics in an amusing way, or masters a difficult and impressive feat. These sensations closely link to the feeling of 'fiero' (from the Italian for pride) that Jane McGonigal describes in Reality Is Broken, and they are driven from a personal sort of goal setting.

The second source of delight is numina. Numina is a catch-all term for creative qualities of the game (such as visuals, text, music, etc) that induce cognitive leaps on the part of the player and encourage her to infer that there is more to the game world than is visible. When you encounter "the cake is a lie" in *Portal* it is hilarious but also manages to convey a sense of a world behind the game.

Both sources of delight have the sense of an authorial voice. They tell us that this is a game that cares, and if we sense that a game is delightful then we start to look for more delight within it. We become more engaged in the game world because of that authorship, and that's when we allow ourselves to believe in it. Audiences are looking for signs of the human among a sea of product. They don't just want to be entertained, or to pass the time. They want to experience the feeling of delight, which is another way of saying they are looking for magic.

Most games only ever manage to be fun for a little while because they are merely innovative, and that's just not good enough any more. We live in a social age where people share clips on YouTube of amazing leaps between towers in *Halo*, and games that permit that sort of zeal are increasingly the only ones that anyone talks about.

So if you want to make the game that changes the world, forget linear improvements. Nobody cares. Focus on delight instead.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him online at whatgamesare.com

In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

On dialogue, and why it's terrible but doesn't have to be

Dialogue in games is terrible. I can say this because I have personally written tens of thousands of words of game dialogue. I have, in the past, both championed and condemned game dialogue writing. I have played games with terrible dialogue and games with less terrible dialogue, and have seen games of both sorts win awards for their terrible writing. I, myself, have won awards for writing games accused of having terrible dialogue. If I am not qualified to make the assertion that game dialogue is terrible, then no one is.

But blasting game dialogue, and the game writers who have devoted themselves to getting it right (and who could be making a lot more money writing equally bad dialogue for other media), is somewhat pointless. More useful would be to ask why game dialogue is terrible, and to see if there is anything to be done about it.

One theory for why game dialogue is terrible is that game writers are bad writers. Having worked with many writers in and across different media, I promise you this is not true. Of course there are bad game writers, but there are also average ones, good ones and a few great ones. As a group, from what I have seen, they conform to a normalised curve. Anyone who asserts that game dialogue is bad because game writers are bad has not given the problem enough thought.

Another argument for why game dialogue is bad is that the writers don't understand the medium. That might be true, but I would argue that no one in any discipline has yet achieved a deep or sophisticated understanding of our medium. From the standpoint of overall cultural comprehension, we're just not there yet. The average game writer, in my experience, does not demonstrate a greater or lesser understanding of the medium than does your average game designer or game programmer. I would counter by saying that the primary reason we consider game dialogue to be terrible is that writers do in fact understand the medium, and that good game dialogue almost automatically sounds like bad dialogue to our ears.

You've all been here: you are sneaking past a guard in a stealth game. You accidentally drop down off of a crate and make too much noise on



Game dialogue is a form of feedback, and its purpose is to clearly indicate that a game state has changed

your landing. The guard leaves his patrol and looks toward the crates in the shadows and barks: "Is someone hiding over there?"

We criticise the line as trite and on the nose and symptomatic of bad game dialogue writing. The guard's question is purely rhetorical; if no one else is there to hear it, we ask who he is talking to, and if another guard is present, he usually does not acknowledge the bark. How can such terrible, stilted, wooden dialogue make it into a shipped game, especially when it is clear that the same line in a film script would be excised, and the story beat covered by a reaction shot from the actor playing the guard? No terrible dialogue required.

But is the line bad dialogue? Is "Who are those guys?" bad dialogue? How about "You talkin' to me?" How about "Is it safe?" Or how about "What are you doing, Dave?"

Of course not. It's absurd to think that these lines of film dialogue are bad in and of themselves. So what is it about game dialogue that makes it so susceptible to criticism? The answer seems to lie in the fact that filmic and ludic dialogue serve different purposes.

Functionally, film dialogue must never say anything that is visually apparent. This is what the cinematic axiom 'show don't tell' means. But game dialogue is different. Game dialogue is a form of feedback, and as feedback, its very purpose is to clearly indicate that a game state has changed. In the case of the guard, his line of dialogue is a clear indicator that he has detected a sound, but has not visually acquired the player and that he is about to begin a dangerous search behaviour. No reaction shot required.

So, really, when we say game dialogue is terrible what we're really saying is that it simply does not sound the way our cultural expectations tell us it should sound. In a sense, it is like saying radio writing is bad writing. Of course radio writing is bad writing… for film. But it's not for film, it's for radio, which has different rules and different functions to serve comprehension by the listener. Ultimately, then, the reason we say game dialogue is terrible is that we have a cultural predisposition to appreciating filmic dialogue, which is a form of dialogue that has evolved in service of a different functional requirement.

So how do we fix bad game dialogue?

We play more games. We play more games until our cultural sensibilities change and our expectation of what good dialogue is evolves to include the kinds of lines we hear every day in games – lines that are in service of player comprehension of the game state, lines that empower players to play intentionally and have a meaningful sense of agency in our worlds.

And if that evolution of our cultural sensibilities causes film dialogue to feel strange and old-fashioned in the way radio dialogue does to us… then, well… sorry, film.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

How to avoid doing your chores

So we'd decided to make a combat-free platformer set in an alien ecosystem of exotic, interactive lifeforms. We coined the term 'action gardening' and now had to invent the corresponding gameplay. What might it be? Immediately we took to plants. Plants have the kinds of restrictions that motivate goal-driven behaviour. You must collect their seeds. They grow only in special chunks of fertile terrain. And since each chunk has room for one plant, you must decide which to grow where. Lastly, if you figure out what to feed it, any plant will spit out seeds, which means you can harvest your own inventory.

It's probably not a shock that, after the novelty wears off, growing plants can be boring. Even though you had a jetpack, and even though you threw seeds to plant them, in our early prototypes growing a dozen plants to finish a level felt a lot like doing your chores.

So we brainstormed about how to make it more interesting. Perhaps each level would specify how many of each plant must be grown. But this seemed worse, as you no longer even got to pick which chores you wanted to do. How about instead you're 'balancing the ecosystem'? Plant A emits ten Oxygen and reduces Temperature by five, whereas Plant B increases Temperature by seven but consumes 15 Nitrogen. Determine which combo of plants will bring conditions to within acceptable ranges. The failure of both solutions is that they exist on the mid level, introducing goals and complexity but only about which plants must be grown. They do nothing to address the actual planting of seeds, the low level, which is where boring activity feels like chores. Mid-level complexity is the stuff of tactical and puzzle games, whereas great action games rarely force players to solve systems of linear equations, which is what that second solution would have amounted to. We considered cutting the low level entirely and making a god game. After all, what good was the character if his actions were tedious and repetitive? You could tap on terrain and select a plant from a menu, or drag creatures around with your finger. But we wanted an action game, not a puzzle game.

This idea got a little closer: whenever you grow a red plant, all nearby terrain turns red, meaning only red plants will grow there. It's still mid-level, because it motivates tactics about what to plant where, but it touches on the low level. Layout becomes important, because some chunks of terrain have more neighbours. Therefore your aim better be good, or the seed might bounce and grow somewhere you didn't intend, maybe with far too many neighbours. Previously, if you missed a throw, you tried again, which just made you feel sucky at doing chores.



It's probably not a shock that, after the novelty wears off, growing plants can be boring. Even if you have a jetpack

What if instead, when you grow plant type A, you must always grow plant type B nearby? This idea had the side effect of forcing attention to the crucial question: why should you care which plant grew where? Well, some plants might set traps and try to eat nearby lifeforms. Others might spit out dangerous seeds. Some plants heal you, if you figure out how. We were reluctant about this because we were avoiding a health system, worried it would too easily substitute for combat.

With or without hit points, the winning solution lay in a deeper understanding of what differentiates chores from fun action gameplay. Consider successful design templates in combat and racing games. There is uncertainty about the outcome and, importantly, the resolution is meaningfully coupled to the player's choices and ability to master the controls. So how well you drive and which power-ups you successfully deploy determines your place in the kart race. Uncertainty, dynamics and mastery: we needed a low-level system that could host interactions with those qualities, and one had been in our prototypes from the beginning: the physics system used for flying, throwing and seed spitting.

Embracing it meant hooking up far more interactions that are triggered physically. A plant spits a seed, but it's heading straight for a pool of acid, so the player intercepts it, twisting in mid-air to throw the seed toward some fertile terrain. But a piece of rubble dislodged from the ceiling unexpectedly knocks the seed off course, within range of a creature that scuttles over to eat it. The player lands in time to wrest it away from the creature, which jumps away in panic, directly into a dangling tentacle trap. And so forth. Nearly any time objects collide in our game, there is some impact relevant to the resolution. To succeed, you must master the controls and make fast decisions.

It turned out very little mid-level was necessary. Instead of anything complicated, we just require the player to grow lots of stuff – it doesn't matter what or where, though we encourage variety. This alone achieves the density that makes our levels sing with interactivity, and the player's attention can stay on the action. It also wound up meeting one of our design ambitions: as you bring the ecosystem to life, you're also playing at level designer, creating your own obstacle course of challenges and opportunities. And because it has uncertainty, dynamics and mastery, the gameplay no longer feels at all like doing your chores.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose second game, about life on Mars, will be released at the end of 2011

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Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Why games resort to stereotypes and clichés

Choose five recent character-driven games and play them for a bit. Listen to the dialogue. It's my contention that a lot of it will sound so similar as to be almost interchangeable across the five games. I'm not talking about what's being said, but the way it's being delivered. There are real conventions in games which writers naturally feel inclined to adhere to. There's a box of characters which we all have access to, and we dip in and pull out the character we want, dress it up a bit and shove it in the game. At least, that's what it feels like.

In the character box you'll find the strong, terse hero; the sassy female with a unique set of skills; the reluctant, questioning sidekick; the aloof, smart villain and his chum the crazed, random villain. And under them we'll find the snitches, the lieutenants, the retired gurus and the thugs and goons just one neuron away from being mindless.

Is this what we want from our games? I'm not being rhetorical. Is it what we want? Here are three reasons why we're not clamouring for richly brilliant, emotionally convincing, refreshingly unique characters. First, in a game you're a character yourself – and since you're you, the game can't tell you what you're like as a person. It can, of course, give you a set of reasons why you might do things: PTSD, a desire for revenge or simply to save the world. But unlike any other form of storytelling it founders when trying to convince you you're in love with the gorgeous, raven-haired Toni. And it's not his fault he can't properly love you back. As a player you can be told what to do and why, but not how to feel.

Second, you want to get on and play the damn game. You know there's an end result you're striving for – you want to find out what it is and strive for it, ideally using an ever-expanding arsenal. You do not want to watch a bunch of animated people talking. You want to hit Start.

Third, if you sit through the cutscenes and listen to the characters, you probably won't care about them. Bad animation, bad dialogue and poor voice acting all take their toll. How often are you looking at and really listening to a character? No, you're checking out the lip-sync, the eye anims and looking to see if the hair and garment movement is worse than *Heavenly Sword*'s.



Writers aren't stupid; they're almost as clever as normal people. And they're writing to a deadline and a word limit

So perhaps it's no wonder games resort to stereotypes and clichés. After all, writers aren't stupid; they're almost as clever as normal people. And they're always writing to a brief, a deadline, and with a limit on words, lines or screen time.

We all want to do our best, though. No designer, artist, coder, musician or writer wants to keep within the tried-and-tested boundaries, knowing that what they're creating is the same as previous things, no matter how successful they were. No, we're developers in a new, exciting, different industry and we want to do new, exciting and different things – or at least copy new exciting and different things from films we've just seen. It's not easy in any discipline, which is partly why it's worth doing. For game writers, though, it's tough – no character, no matter how brilliantly devised and written, will work if what the player sees doesn't match the complexity of what they're being asked to buy into. To believe the human-ness of game characters, you need to see human-like graphics. A *Manic Miner* love story has to be as cartoony as Miner Willy himself. Make a story element or emotion more involved or subtle than the character appears while delivering it and all people will see is the gap between the two. And they'll laugh at it. In Bond movies, minions can't have families. In games, unrealistic characters (pretty much all of them) can't have emotions.

Of course, this might all be a cop out. The fault might simply lie with the writers, who aren't capable of creating depth and realism in game characters. OK, just have a look at some of the test pieces writers come up with when they've got Final Draft or Word in front of them, and the only issue they face is making the characters feel real. They'll be good. A lot will be great.

The inescapable conclusion is that creating characters for games involves a compromise. You the writer can't draw out the vast depths of light and shade you'd like to. Instead you choose a few traits which really inform the character, and you build from there. I, and I suspect many of my colleagues, use The Diamond. The uppermost point is the one defining element or trait that drives the character. There are two equal secondary traits which also affect him or her. Finally there's a fourth, lesser or perhaps simply hidden element. Any of these can support or conflict with any other, and some may come into play rarely, if at all. Using a technique like this focuses on what's important, and as much as it's a compromise it's also a tool for decluttering. And it works beautifully if you replace the traits with individual characters, should you wish to explore relationships between them. It's used a lot in TV writing for this purpose.

Finally, let's remember where we're headed. As games get better, the graphics are improving and the characters are naturally becoming deeper and more fleshed out. I suspect in-game stereotypes will always be with us, but as each year passes they'll be that bit better.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online





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Which is the best selling horror series?



Silent Hill



Alone in the Dark



Resident Evil



Region Specific: Dublin, Ireland

The Irish city with a burgeoning development scene

For a region so close to the UK, Ireland's game industry is a great deal less prominent than you might expect it to be. And yet Dublin (1) is home to middleware specialists Havok, one of gaming's most important brands. And that's not its only claim to fame, as evidenced by our discussions with its local developers (2). But when you consider the other technology companies – Kore, Demonware and now Swrve (3) – that the city has produced, along with the rush of customer service operations that have taken advantage of the city's European reach, it's apparent that such the common strand here is providing players with smooth experiences at the mechanical level.

BioWare has located all of *Star Wars: The Old Republic*'s (4) customer service here. Riot has done the same for *League Of Legends*. Gala Networks supports its various MMOG (5) players in several European languages, and PopCap (6) does the same for its cheerful range of casual hits. But there is a development scene beginning to grow here, too. PopCap's premises house a fully functional studio and homegrown developer and publisher Jolt Online is making a name for itself with some big browser releases (7). And to supply graduates equipped to exploit this vibrant gaming scene there is Trinity College Dublin (8) with its range of game-related courses.




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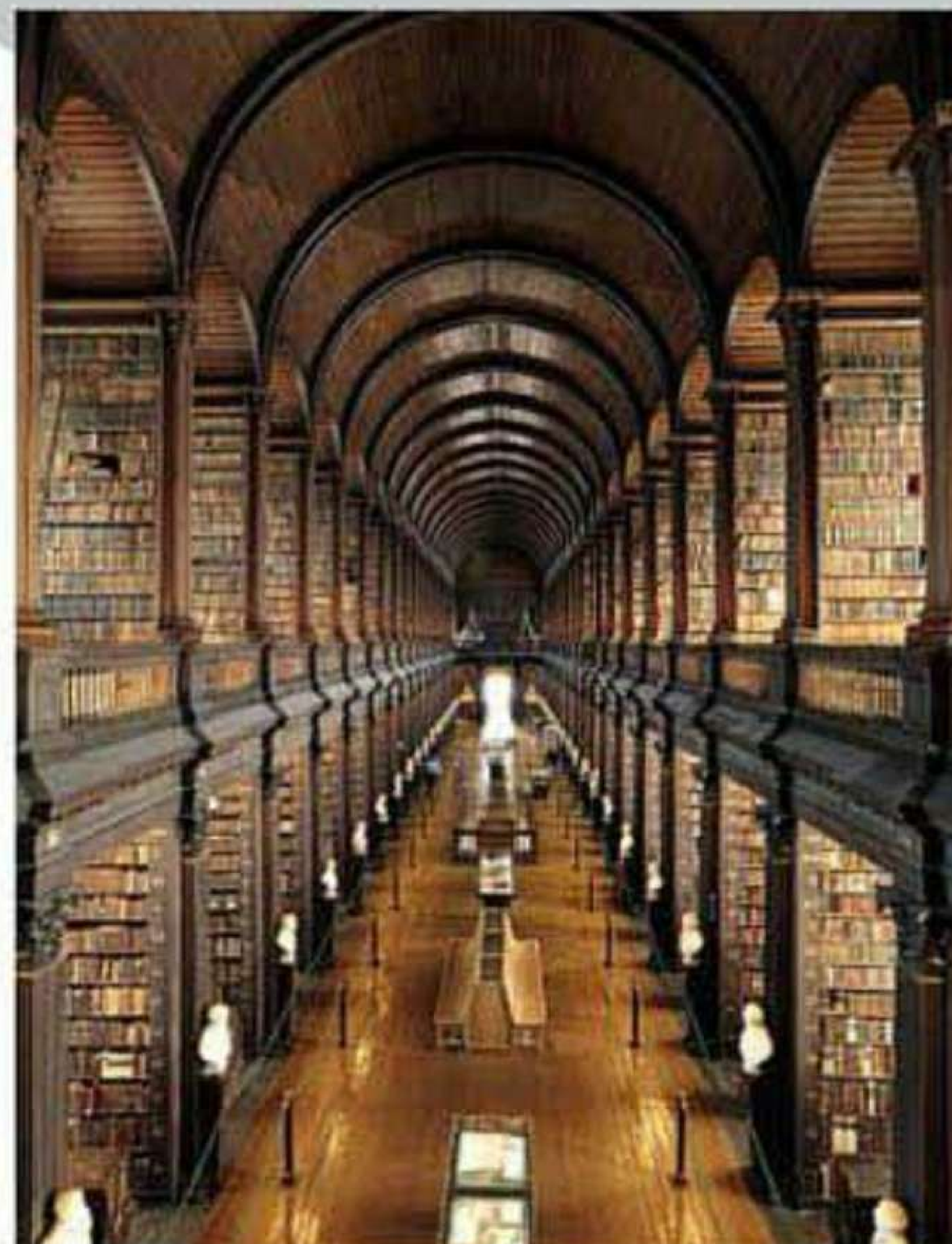


DUBLIN DEVELOPS

World-class middleware and customer service have put Ireland's capital on the map



LANDMARKS
1 The Jameson distillery, founded in 1780 2 Sailing on Dublin bay in the Dun Laoghaire Regatta 3 St Patrick's Cathedral, founded in 1191 4 The St Patrick's Day parade 5 The vast library at Trinity College Dublin





Let's start by dealing with the black and white elephant in the room: yes, Guinness really does taste better in Dublin. Ascertaining whether that's just the placebo effect talking or a genuine phenomenon would require the supping of many more pints than we managed during our brief visit to the city, but one difference is more easily quantifiable: you'll pay a lot more for a pint of the black stuff in Dublin than you would in, say, London, despite the brewery being in its centre.

Take into account Ireland's ongoing recession, and you'd be forgiven for fearing that Dublin is on its knees. But even a cursory walk around the city – and you can walk almost anywhere thanks to its small size – reveals day- and nightlife in rude health. In fact, surrounded by shopping, eating and drinking in Dublin's streets and bars, it's almost impossible to detect the recession at all.

Such contradictory buoyancy is partly down to significant foreign investment, especially from the US, not least when it comes to the rapidly growing game industry here. As a result the city is bristling with tech talent, from Facebook and Google to PopCap, MMOG publisher Gala Networks and *League Of Legends* developer Riot Games – many persuaded by the pitches of Ireland's Investment and Development Agency (IDA). The IDA's aim is to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) across six key areas – one of which, digital media, covers game companies.

"When Zynga were opening up their European headquarters here only a couple of weeks ago, one of the guys from California was here," IDA chief executive officer **Barry O'Leary** proudly recalls. "He made the point that when they were still only about 30 people, our guy out in Mountain View was talking to them about internationalisation before they were even thinking about that future."

Ireland's low corporation tax rate of 12.5 per cent doesn't hurt, of course, but the Zynga anecdote is evidence of the IDA's new focus on smaller companies – which O'Leary places in the sub-€20 million turnover bracket.

"If you look back to 1990, one of the dominant players in foreign direct investment in Ireland was Fruit of the Loom T-shirts – they were the biggest multinational employer!" he laughs. "You couldn't possibly do that business in Ireland today. But Intel were only breaking ground in their facility here in Ireland at that time – today they've invested over $7 billion. The reason I say this is that FDI evolves all the time, and it's very important that we bring in new areas."

But home-grown talent is of equal import, and IDA's sister organisation Enterprise Ireland works to support indigenous companies such as development middleware specialist Havok, game personalisation start-up Swrve, and browser game developer and publisher Jolt Online, to grow and successfully export their products.



The Liffey divides Dublin into business and cultural centres in the south, and the north with its greater industrial focus

talent that collectively covers most languages you can think of. And conversely, the effect of Dublin's small domestic market echoes that of the one we found in Helsinki back in **E**229, encouraging domestic players to look beyond their own borders from the very beginning.

Internal relations, however, are less defined as this young, fluid and rapidly expanding young industry gropes for its natural limits. But strong bonds are being forged, thanks in part to the largely close proximity of the companies here and the efforts of organisations such as the IDA, EI and the Interactive Games Association of Ireland. Headed up by former members of EA, Havok and Namco, the IGAI's ambitions are no less than to make Ireland the best European territory from which to create and deliver games, lobbying for tax incentives, access to skills and education, and access to finance for start-ups.

IGAI CEO **David Sweeney** is keen for the sector to grow into new areas in future: "The Irish industry needs to position itself for further development within Ireland and abroad and move away from being a 'service only' industry to being an indigenous and robust high growth sector with consequent high quality job creation."

Ireland lacks much in the way of a traditional game development heritage, but has instead become a hotbed for technology and middleware companies

For reasons we discover during our group discussion over the page, Ireland lacks much in the way of a traditional game development heritage, but has instead become a hotbed for technology and middleware companies. The other major pillar here is service, and as the games-as-a-service model increasingly comes to the fore, Dublin finds itself in a uniquely strong position.

Riot Games has chosen Dublin as the base for *League Of Legends*' customer support worldwide, even closing down its US support team to relocate it to Ireland; PopCap and Gala Networks both run their customer support and localisation services from Dublin-based European headquarters; and in nearby Galway, BioWare has extended its Austin operation by setting up a worldwide contact centre for *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. It's a confident bid to take the lead in a rapidly growing game industry sector.

Part of the reason for this confidence is Dublin's remarkable multiculturalism. It's a presence that has fuelled its own growth as companies look to capitalise on Dublin's easy reach into Europe, cultural links with the US, and a pool of local

An increasingly active events calendar, too, provides opportunities to get together and meet with key figures from around the world. F.ounders is an invite-only gathering of 150 of the world's top technology company founders which has earned itself a reputation as "Davos for geeks", while the second Dublin Web Summit takes place this October, inviting the world's "leading tech entrepreneurs, investors and influencers" to Ireland.

It's no coincidence that the majority of the companies we visit are either in the process of moving to larger premises or proudly showing us around their shiny new offices. This is a region with huge potential that is positioning itself as one of the most important industry hubs in Europe, if not the world. That it is now seeking to add home-grown game development to a bow already strung with middleware solutions, service centres, localisation and publishing is indicative of its ambitious trajectory. For now, though, let's settle on a more important question: whose round is it again? ■





DUBLIN'S GAELIC GAMES



Some of the key figures driving Dublin's game industry on why the city can no longer be ignored






Emmanuel Dowdall
IDA


Richard Barnwell
Jolt Online


Michael Manzke
Trinity College Dublin


Paul Breslin
PopCap Games


Mirko Gozza
Riot Games


Maive McConnon
IDA


David Coghlan
Havok


Ruben Cortez
BioWare


Steve Collins
Swrve


Nicolas Pajot
Gala Networks Europe

Our Region Specific trips are normally characterised by frantic taxi rides between studios, often followed by an apology for arriving late and a request for a cup of tea. But the compact layout of Dublin allows us to walk to every appointment, even taking in a couple of the city's many parks en route. This gentle pace of life hasn't dulled the ambitions of the companies who've settled here, though, and we gather together under the huge chandeliers of PopCap's meeting room to discuss the industry's rapid rise. With us are Riot Games general manager **Mirko Gozza**; Jolt Online chief executive **Richard Barnwell**; Havok managing director **David Coghlan**; Swrve CTO **Steve Collins**; **Maive McConnon** and **Emmanuel Dowdall** from the IDA; general manager of PopCap **Paul Breslin**; Gala Networks Europe COO **Nicolas Pajot**; BioWare's senior director European operations **Ruben Cortez**; and **Dr Michael Manzke**, a lecturer at the University of Dublin's Trinity College.

How is Dublin as a place to live and work?

Paul Breslin Dublin is a fantastic city: it's a very young city, there's about a million and a half people living here and there's a very high population under the age of 25. You can walk 200 metres from here to Temple Bar or Grafton Street where there's lots of nightlife – it's a great place for young creative people who want to enjoy working here and also have fun.

Mirko Gozza You can find people here from all nationalities, both in the industry but also on the street. Actually I think I found more Italians on the streets of Dublin than anywhere else in the world! [Laughter] That's nice when it comes to recruiting.

David Coghlan Certainly, talking with the people around this table, it seems like many of us are looking abroad to bring in talent, but I think that's a net benefit to us all because we build up a critical mass of developers and talented people with backgrounds in the game space.

Steve Collins I don't really have any numbers to support this, but it feels to me like the number of people working in the game industry here has just gone crazy – it feels like we're on the cusp of something very interesting. Having worked in the industry for a while, it's been quite stagnant for a long time, and now there's a sense of excitement.

PB I used to live in San Francisco during the dotcom boom, and places in Dublin like Hanover Quay – where on a Friday night the place is full of young people pouring out of the offices, drinking cocktails and enjoying themselves – reminds me very much of being there. So something exciting is happening in Ireland, and I'm sure it's very similar in Galway, as well.

SC Too much emphasis on the *young* there Paul…

Richard Barnwell There's an awful lot of buzz around the city – but we were out last night and Grafton Street was just full of people talking and chatting. It feels like a good, fun place to be.

Michael Manzke Places like Grafton Street in other cities, they'd be empty at night. Even in the shopping areas you find people around – it's really an exciting place.

DC There's a real heart to the city, which is shown by the fact that we're all so closely located – [addresses Cortez] with some exceptions!

Ruben Cortez Well Galway's only two hours away, so we can get here pretty quick!

RB And close to the pubs as well! [Laughter]

Nicolas Pajot I think for companies who have international ambitions – we need to hire people from all over the world – finding a city which is really cosmopolitan but with English as a main language is very appealing. So for a company like ours, that's been one of the key factors to establishing here in Dublin.

How do you benefit from this soup of international people being here?

MG Most of the companies that are here have a service oriented strategy, so when your company is really focused on providing good service, you need to think about who your customer is. Our European customers cover over 26 different languages. It's easy in a country like Ireland, and the city of Dublin, to find talented people who can support our operation in this direction.

PB When we first came here five and a half years ago, our initial goal was to service the European audience – 85 per cent of them don't speak English, so we deal with that through localisation. We've been fortunate because companies like Google, Microsoft and Activision have been here for a decade or more so there's a pool of linguistic talent that's built up over that time, and being able to feed into that is fantastic. Bringing it in externally is challenging, so having it here at your doorstep is a great advantage.

NP The city has been the home of world-class companies for a long time now. We have about 50 nationalities in the company with 120 people, but nearly all the people have been hired directly from Ireland – even if they're French natives, Germans, Turkish or others, most of them are already here working at other big companies like Google, Facebook etcetera. It's a very good city for a company looking at international talent.

And well placed with its reach into Europe?

SC And more to the point its reach into America – it's cultural and geographical links to the US are incredibly important. That's why you see a lot of US corporations setting up here. I think I've heard it said that it's actually the culture that makes as big a difference as the language or other things – we share a lot of our current culture, certainly in the *younger* generation [laughter], with the US.

DC It's to do with business culture as well. Within Ireland, in terms of the way companies interact and do business, I think we feel a very close affinity with the US, and in some cases more so than we would feel with continental Europe.

"Within Ireland, in terms of the way companies do business, we feel a very close affinity with the US, and in some cases more so than with continental Europe"

SC Being a small island and essentially not having our own market for our own produce, we tend to be very outward-facing right from the beginning. It's always about: 'Can I reach the US market initially? Then can I think about the European market? Then can I think about the worldwide market?' Those are the natural stepping stones.

DC Certainly from an indigenous company point of view I see it as a really big positive, because you don't have that easy market on your doorstep that you can focus on first before extending your ambition – you're actually forced to be ambitious and think globally from day one, and I think that's great at an early stage in a company's evolution.

What about inter-studio relationships?

DC Pints last night was a start! [Laughter]

PB When we first came here I didn't know anybody at this table, and now in the last 12 to 18 months we've started to build out a network more and get to know our peers and colleagues, and I really feel part of the family. It feels like we're building something that has huge potential and we're just beginning.

SC It feels like a critical mass has been reached where there's always enough people to go to a

workshop or a meeting or event, and that's very different to where it was five years ago.
MG I'm quite new to the country, but with the city being so a small and the places to go and eat pretty much the same, I often see colleagues having lunch with people from other companies. It's a great environment.

A lot of companies here are focused on customer service – is that something that fits well with Ireland's reputation for friendliness?
RC For us, it played a very big part in wanting to come here. America has strong Irish roots – I think there are more Irish people in America than there are in Ireland! Everyone I talked to when we were coming here was like: 'Oh I'm Irish' or: 'My parents are Irish' or: 'My grandparents are Irish'. My wife found out that her grandparent was Irish and she didn't even know that! That culture has extended to the point where we just felt very comfortable that we could find an employment base in Ireland that would cater to the type of player that tends to play a BioWare game.
DC To extend the stereotype a little, if you think also of the Irish as being a very prevalent nation abroad in terms of our emigration and everything else, it does point to a certain inherent resourcefulness in the Irish people. And I think from an indigenous company point of view that's something that holds true as well. You see how, even on the technology side, Ireland has punched way above its weight relative to size – look at the number of successful middleware companies that come from here. An element of that talks to the resourcefulness and innovation that we all like to think is inherent in the psyche here.
SC When it comes to customer service, I don't see that it's part of our DNA. When I think of the professionalism of customer service, I think of the States. The Irish side of this is more about… I don't want to fall into the trap that it's all about our friendliness, but it's the desire to make other people feel good and the desire to be doing a good job. And I think that's actually at the heart, culturally, of what makes us successful at this space. We haven't had a history of customer service, but it's something that resonating well based on other aspects of our culture.

How closely do companies here work with educational institutes to create local talent?
MMa From a university standpoint, especially with our interactive entertainment master degree, we encourage companies to come in and present themselves and their work, and also do projects.
SC I think the universities have been very important to the growth of the game industry in Ireland. A number of the companies round this table essentially started off in university and were spun out of various research departments. That's been very useful in seeding and serving the indigenous companies that are here, and that then adds to the attractiveness of Ireland as a location to base your operation. Certainly the universities are incredibly important in generating a talent pool, and our companies depend very heavily on them.
MMa And I think that interaction helps to attract international students because we can sell that the fact that if they come here they can generate a relationship with the industry.
PB And it's actually quite easy to work with the universities in a small country – my colleagues in the states are surprised with the amount of interactions we have with Trinity and other colleges in Ireland. Our experience has been that colleges listen to what we want, then react to that, and we're getting very good students through – we have internship programmes and most of them get hired at the end of their last college year.
RB That's actually one thing we do differently from the UK – the unis are incredibly open to those conversations. There's no red tape, not many barriers. We've had quite a lot of vacancies recently and we just phone up universities including Trinity, and they'll speak to people, put the job specs up straight away and get hold of their students – that speeds things up no end. In the UK there are always processes to follow.

What role have government organisations played in developing the industry here?
PB When we first came to Ireland the IDA were incredibly useful in advising us what agencies we should use, how we should set up our banking relationship, what data centre should we use. The IDA held our hands through this process and were very helpful in that regard. Half the staff here at PopCap aren't Irish, we've a lot of people coming in from Asia, north America – visas can be a big issue from the company's perspective, but also for the potential employee having to wait many months for them to be processed. The IDA have been very helpful by rushing them through.

> "On the technology side, Ireland has punched way above its weight – look at the number of successful middleware companies that come from here"



SC There are a number of government agencies that are critical. Enterprise Ireland focuses more on the local indigenous companies and getting them to be more successful in terms of exports and local hiring. Recently there's been a request for start-ups in the games and Internet space to apply for seed funding. They had over 110 applications from small companies and only ten slots. It's extremely exciting to see that level of activity happening. Talking to people outside of Ireland, in [Silicon] Valley and other places, they're extremely envious of an agency like EI because they do a really tremendous job attracting international speakers, having mentorship and training programmes for local companies and providing that focal point for funding companies in their early stages. IDA and EI are both doing a great job.
Emmanuel Dowdall I couldn't endorse that more. Ireland is an open digital economy and societal change is being driven by new technology and trends. The way we're structured in the marketplace is to go out and not just focus on some of the larger companies in the industry, but also to recognise the new emergent companies

and tap into them at an early stage. And because the game industry represents new business models, new ways of monetising, advertising, touching customers and breaking into new markets, it's extremely interesting and very exciting for the economy. We've a real need here for jobs, and one of the things that we see in this industry is the ability to convert into real employment. Breaking down barriers in order to create an environment where companies can feel comfortable is really important, and government policy is very much industry led – it's focused around understanding what the industry requires.

Maive McConnon What we've seen in the last couple of years is a lot of excitement around this area, and the cluster is really evolving. That's great for us because it allows us to go out and target the next round of companies using our track record here. What we see across the board is that companies arriving initially focus on one or two activities, then start branching out because of the ability to get people and to get skillsets and because there are reference sites for other ranges of activities. From an Irish perspective we all benefit because of that broader range of skills. On the customer support side in particular, one of the exciting things for us is the fact that this industry touches customers in a way that a lot of the Internet companies are only starting to do; it's very much leading the way. We see an opportunity to use some of the business models evolving here in other sectors – proving almost like an incubator.

PB From a PR perspective, there's been a lot of negative stories about Ireland recently out there in the news. But there's a lot of good-news stories out there in the game industry, and no one really ever hears about them. So I appreciate the IDA's support in trying to get more of those out there.

DC While technology in Ireland is doing well, game technology in Ireland is doing hugely well. Every company round this table is significantly larger than it was one year ago – we're seeing a huge expansion in the gaming sector in particular. And in many ways that's bucking a trend: look at the UK where there's a talent flight to markets like Montreal for tax reasons.

ED Towards the beginning of the year we did a rudimentary number count and over the preceding four to five years we were looking at over 200 per cent growth. I know that that number will have significantly improved by the end of this year. It's huge credit to the companies in recognising an opportunity and actually implementing it.

MG Someone working in the gaming industry is perceived as a lower level compared to a professional in other industry, and I think that's why the good news doesn't go mainstream.



SC There's an anti-correlation effect as well. If you look at students looking to enter the job market, there's a high correlation between the top students and a desire to work in the industry because it's seen as a great intersection of art, design, creativity and being very technical. So I think that works very much in our favour, and that's always been underpinning some of the success of how we've been able to hire people.

RB I remember five or six years ago, working in games you were paid less money – you had to be really passionate to justify earning less cash. Now we're having to pay a lot more money for good developers. So I do think that's starting to shift.

How has the recession affected you?

SC We've found it easier to hire people, easier to find better office space, our overall ability to be competitive is going up as a result of costs. So in fact it really feels like whatever is happening outside of the industry is fuelling our growth – we're all growing quickly here, as fast as we can.

DC Havok as a company has been 100 per cent export since its inception 12 years ago. So I agree with what Steve said – from our point of view there's an increase in competitiveness across the board which was needed after a long period of very aggressive growth in Ireland. And it directly translates into a more attractive cost base relative to other markets where we're seeing, for example, a significant expansion in San Francisco at the moment that's making it a relatively less attractive place to hire.

NP Strangely enough the economic downturn in Ireland hasn't been terrible for gaming companies. With lower costs, more man-power, it's been very easy to find people in the last two years compared to three or four years ago. Salaries have increased somehow as well – we're not that affected by the economic environment in Ireland or Europe overall.

RB A lot of it is perception. I've had problems bringing senior people over from other countries who've said: 'I'm not bringing my family to an environment where I haven't got that stability'.

PB It goes back to the bad news that you hear.

MMa But when you actually come here and walk around, and we find this with the companies we bring all the time, there's such a buzz around that they suddenly go: 'What we're hearing in the press doesn't match what we're seeing on the ground.' Housing is now affordable and that's a very positive thing to increase student numbers. For almost a decade here it seemed that the numbers of students choosing technology was declining, but that has really turned around.

RC If it wasn't for the recession we may not be here. It's a hard thing to state and it's unfortunate that Ireland's going through it, but because of it we're here. And we're able to bring in several hundred jobs that we may not have been able to if we had tried this five years ago. So catching it on a downturn has helped to keep our real-estate costs down, some of our labour costs down, and it's allowed me to buy more for the same dollar to create a better experience for our employees, and it helps us create a much larger BioWare Ireland entity than what we originally planned for the same amount of money. Even as it improves, we've bought in at the low end of the market so it really helps us to want to put more stuff here in the future, because my fixed costs are not going to change – I've already made the investment.

MG Our HQ recently moved customer support for the whole company – North America, South America, Europe – to Dublin, removing player support from LA because that was too expensive.

If business is booming, why are you still calling for further tax relief?

SC You always have to be very careful about your competitiveness. Even though you might be doing











very well today, it doesn't mean tomorrow is going to be the same. You always have to be ahead of the curve and tax breaks would mean we're even more competitive. We can always look to other nationalities not too far from our door here where the costs are significantly lower.

DC It's not just about the companies that are here already, it's actually that you're seeing a momentum in this sector, represented by the companies around this table, and it points to what could be, in the event that we continue to fuel that momentum. While Ireland has been very successful in growing indigenous companies and attracting multinational companies, I'd like to feel that we're just scratching the surface here and that if we held this event in five years' time there'd actually be a lot more companies and everybody here would be bigger. Tax breaks can be an important element of that.

PB We just want to develop our games, and to do that we need to hire more people, and tax breaks help us to do that. My CEO in Seattle looks around the globe considering where to develop the next great game, I'm always holding my hand up saying: 'Let's develop it in Dublin!' It's actually quite cheap now compared to other regions we've been looking at, and a few things are happening in Dublin off the back of that. So I hope we can get more tax breaks to enable us to hire more people and create more games which can only be good for what's happening in Ireland.

SC In this space, a tax break is a sure-fire investment. It returns the investment. Obviously there are constraints, but it's a no-brainer.

MG We saw what happened in the UK last year, when the prospect of tax relief was dropped, and straight away many companies decided to move to the Netherlands which was providing greater incentive to open offices over there. Once a couple of companies start opening offices in other countries, it becomes so easy to hire talent that other companies will follow. So now that we are in the growth of Ireland, if we don't encourage it to the next level, we could interrupt it and help other countries to take one of the most profitable and growing among all markets.

How do you see yourselves in relation to the UK? Do you feel part of the same community?

SC I think there's always been a very big gap between Ireland and the UK in that respect. It's been surprising how big that's been – because back in the '80s the UK game industry was one of the biggest industries worldwide, and yet none of that really came across to Ireland at all. There are some minor examples – Gremlin Graphics and people like that – but nothing took hold here and I'm not entirely sure why that was. Since then there's always been the sense that the Irish Sea is quite wide.

RB I find it really quite strange. Coming from the UK game industry, I know that industry and the people in that very well. We're only 50 minutes from the UK by plane, yet it feels very much like the US market with regards to the separation. But every time people come across here I see that we do things almost identically. I don't really understand why there is so much of a gap – I think starting to build that bridge is something we need to do.

SC I think the powerbase in has shifted to the States, and most of the companies that operate in the UK now are subsidiaries of US operations. Not all of them, and that's changing again, but I think at the time Ireland could have had much closer links to the UK but never did, and now it probably won't.

RB There's just so many acquisitions of studios and I think EA specifically has got quite a lot of the independent studios. The indie scene is growing again, but I can only think of a handful of big independent companies. The interesting thing is that the independent companies in the UK are really quite substantial: I'm talking two, three, four hundred people, which over here would be the biggest of the big.

SC For a very long time, there was a sense of: 'When is the first really successful Irish game company going to be created that's creating IP locally?' I know that's happening now, but it still feels like we're very much focused on the services and tools end of the industry. It's great to find an aspect of the industry that we can exploit and be good at, but there's always that slight sense of it would be nice to have a couple of indigenous IPs created as well.

DC If you look back five years ago, the critical mass needed to actually be a game company was huge. So it was very difficult to get from having no production talent, no art talent, no technology talent, to being a game company. Interestingly now, with the huge diversity of the industry it's possible to be a game company with five people again. And that's a positive, because the types of companies that grew up in Ireland, like Havok, like Demonware, certainly needed to be middleware companies because it wasn't an option being a game company. Now that has changed, we should expect to see waves of successful Irish indigenous companies that are actually game developers because of the global changes that are happening in the industry.

So what else does the future hold?

SC I believe we're very well strategically placed, because the industry's shifting to a games-as-a-service model, and what we do is game service.

NP Ireland's very attractive for companies trying to enter Europe and have their international HQ in Europe, and I think we're going to see more and more companies coming from the US and Asia. It's going to be more competitive, but the good side is that the industry is going to grow as well.

ED From a government perspective, one of the key issues for us is to support the vision that the companies bring to the table, but also to actively support investment in R&D. If the levels of uptake in R&D over the past two years are any indication, I think it's going to provide greater stability and stickiness for the industry's growth potential well into the future – that's where we'd like to really help it get to and support it every way we can.

SC There's an interesting off-shoot in that the financial situation we find ourselves in at the moment means we're thinking longer term now – the entire nation is thinking: 'What do we need to do to position ourselves well over the next three to five years?' So you've got both the impetus that the recession creates, and you've got the well positioned initial start we have here in the industry and the fact that it is growing substantially and becoming a mass consumer industry like it never was before. You'd have to say that there's lots of things lining up nicely there that could contribute enormously to our growth and prosperity here. ■

> "My CEO in Seattle looks around the globe for where to develop the next great game, I'm always holding my hand up saying: 'Let's develop it in Dublin!'"

PopCap Games International

The casual developer with more than a hint of hardcore about it



Founded 2000
Location Dublin
Employees 475
Key staff John Vechey, Brian Fiete and Jason Kapalka, founders
URL www.popcap.com
Selected softography *Bejeweled, Feeding Frenzy, Chuzzle, Peggle, Plants Vs Zombies, Zuma*
Current projects *Peggle* for iPad, unannounced social project



Popcap's characters and branding are everywhere in its central Dublin offices, especially in the staff gaming area found near the canteen



STUDIO INSIGHT
Paul Breslin general manager for Europe
Cathy Orr senior director of international PR





Orange walls, giant zombie heads and brightly coloured Chuzzles absolutely everywhere you look – even if you didn't know before you arrived, it would hard to mistake these offices for anyone's but PopCap's. And it's perhaps only when you're bombarded with all of them at once that it hits you just how recognisable PopCap's creations are, lending the developer's titles an appeal which reaches far beyond the traditional gamer.

That reach is further hammered home when we're shown to the room in which today's meeting will take place. Encircling the table on every wall are clippings from the press. Starting with coverage from the higher end of the videogame magazine market, the press interest works round the room until it reaches gossip mag articles in which celebrities wax lyrical about *Bejeweled*, and the playing habits of OAPs dubbed 'Nantendo' are revealed to include PopCap's output.

"Our remit was to be the mobile centre of excellence within PopCap," PopCap's senior director of international PR **Cathy Orr** tells us. "When we started five years ago it was pre-smartphones and social networks and the landscape was entirely different. So we've watched the whole space evolve, and we're delighted we got that role now because it's such an exciting space to be in."

"It's great from our European perspective that we get to work on PopCap's hottest franchises and on some of the hottest platforms," adds general manager for Europe **Paul Breslin**, before going on to list some of the projects the Dublin site has been responsible for which include *Bejeweled Live* for Windows Phone 7 and *Plants Vs Zombies*' iOS updates. The studio is currently working on a version of *Peggle* optimised for iPad as well as unannounced social projects.

While Dublin plays host to European localisation and customer support, the presence of a fully-fledged development studio here sets it apart in a city so focused on middleware and service. And everyone here, no matter which area they work in, gets to contribute game ideas through the fortnightly PopCamp, during which everyone downs tools to have hotdogs on the balcony and brainstorm ideas. They can also be submitted by sticking a Post-It note on the staff canteen window; a display we're allowed to see, though sadly not able to share lest PopCap sends a wave of angry lawyer zombies up our lawn.

"We talk internally about the magic of PopCap," says Breslin when we ask if the companies recent acquisition by EA will jeopardise such communal spirit. "It's hard to define, but it's everybody who works for the company, the talented people that are here. So touching that is not on the agenda – we want to keep the magic at PopCap, as do EA. They value that, and it's something that culturally won't change."

Even now, though, communicating that culture as the company explores social avenues can be problematic: "I remember when I first started with PopCap five years ago," says Orr, "talking to a lot of game mags, they'd be like: 'Well, casual's not real games is it?' I got that so much. And it's particularly in my mind at the moment because if I ring someone about a social game, they'll go: 'But are social games real games?' and I'm like: 'You're kidding? We're back here again. I'll call you back in five years!'" ■

FUN

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PopCap.com

Jolt Online

A home-grown developer that's throwing the casual rulebook away

jolt

Founded 2008
Location Dublin
Employees 30+
Key staff Richard Barnwell, CEO; Martin Frain, CMO; Derek Mcloughlin, CTO
URL www.joltonline.com
Selected softography *Legends Of Zork*
Current projects *Utopia Kingdoms, Championship Manager: Rivals* and an unannounced project





Members of Jolt's sports team, responsible for *Championship Manager Rivals*, gather for an impromptu design meeting. Or Match of the Day

STUDIO INSIGHT
Richard Barnwell
CEO



Jolt stands out as one of the very few home-grown studios (and the only one we visit during our time here). The browser game developer and publisher is almost the antithesis of PopCap – at least in terms of its market focus – unapologetically aiming its games at the most hardcore of casual game players (the "mid-core", as Jolt's enigmatic chief executive **Richard Barnwell** terms them) who, of course, almost entirely consist of men.

"The only thing we really care about is the focus of Jolt and the games we develop," asserts Barnwell. "No one in this company's been recruited to develop games for children or 43-year old women. Everyone here has an interest in developing games for our target audience – 15- to 35-year-old males."

To an outsider, such an attitude might seem bullish and even short-sighted considering the unyielding desire of developers and publishers to appeal to the broadest demographic possible, but Jolt's single-minded focus is one born of astute business acumen. If it appears uncouth, that's only the effect of viewing the traditional game industry through the prism of casual and social games. We see plenty of women at the studio (Barnwell claims 25 per cent of the staff is female) and we don't hear a single fart joke.

"The Wii was first introducing family gaming, games like *Moshi Monsters* are taking the kids' market by storm and now you've got social games getting the American female markets – and that's really great," says Barnwell. "But our focus is on the market that we know very well, one that has disposable income."

While the company remains staunchly committed to targeting the male audience, it is looking to expand in other ways, chiefly by entering every territory it can, starting with Turkey, Russia, eastern Europe and the middle east, tapping into the same age and sex demographics but across vastly more nationalities. And with its latest game, *Championship Manager Rivals*, it's likely to find players in abundance.

Acquired by GameStop in 2009, the studio houses three teams each specialising in a different genre. Currently hunkering down after the acquisition and an almost entirely refreshed staff, Jolt Online is finding its feet.

"I came on post-acquisition at the end of last year," explains Barnwell. "At the very beginning, it was a bumpy ride – there are always adjustment periods – but now we've started to get a little more serious. And we've been going for it for the last four or five months. And Gamestop let us run pretty much independently, but they take away a lot of the headaches and give a lot of support – like our finance director is GameStop Ireland's finance director. We don't have to worry about a lot of operational functions, but our studio culture remains untouched."

And having such powerful backing has enabled Jolt to push a little harder: "We just have ten people on each game, and the advantage of that is that if something hasn't worked and you have to drop it – while there's still a significant cost – it's not the millions you could lose from a cancelled triple-A project," says Barnwell.

"This year alone, we've dropped three games, because they weren't monetising the way we wanted them to and would cost us more to keep than to get rid of. But we're backed by a $10 billion a year business, so I can take risks because I don't have to worry in the same way that a start-up might. Our strategy's long term, so we're being a little more aggressive than most other companies have the opportunity to do." ■


Championship
MANAGER
RIVALS

Havok

A proudly Irish company that provides the world's developers with chaos to order



Founded 1998
Location Dublin
Employees 115 and growing
Key staff David Coghlan, MD; Andrew Bond, VP of technology; Dave Gargan, VP of engineering; Brian Waddle, VP of worldwide sales and marketing; Felix Roeken, VP of international development; Andrew Bowell, head of product management; Ross O'Dwyer, head of professional services and support; Andrew Callanan, head of finance
URL www.havok.com



The staff at Havok's Dublin offices. The team is made up some of the best developers in the industry, including many of the company's founders

STUDIO INSIGHT
David Coghlan
MD
Dave Gargan
VP of engineering





As we stand at reception, waiting for our hosts to come and meet us, the TV on the wall showing a promo reel of realtime environmental physics has us transfixed. It's a surprisingly soothing video considering its destructive content, as pillars crack under gunfire, vases shatter across slippery marble floors and numbers we can't interpret dance at the sides of the screen.

Perhaps it's the result of spending so long playing in inert environments that we still coo at a lively physics simulation as if it were the first time we'd seen a ragdoll. And whether you realise it or not, this Dublin company is responsible for a great many of those moments.

"Even though we're aside from the industry, we like to be very much involved in the production of games, and that's what motivates a lot of the people who come to join us," VP of engineering **Dave Gargan** tells us. But the atmosphere here is far less chaotic than the results of the technology being developed; in fact, there's an almost zen-like calm as we're shown around the new open-plan office, carefully laid out to ensure that the small teams are in close proximity.

Though Havok has become synonymous with physics, the rubble and debris left over from its efforts has necessitated exploration into new territories. The result is a portfolio of seven products covering everything from physics and cloth dynamics to AI and animation.

"When you think about environments that are fully destructible and very dynamic, that brings on challenges for your AI system, altering your pipelines for how you create destructible objects," explains managing director **David Coghlan**. "So really, it's from that core premise of a fully dynamic world that we expanded into other products."

The company's customer base has expanded in the past 18 months to include more indie developers thanks in part to Havok's Strike program which allows studios working on smaller budgets to more easily access its middleware. And since 2008, the company has offered its Havok Physics Engine for free on PC – a move made possible by Intel's acquisition of the company the same year.

Havok updates its tools four times a year responding to developer's needs as they arise. "[Studios] are very open with us, sharing their concepts and exactly what their ambition is for the next title," Gargan explains. "And we'll have people push us on different fronts. Some games will be large open worlds with issues around scale and instancing, others will be small sandbox games concerned with the fidelity of the situation."

Engineers will also visit developers on site to work with them directly, making for an extremely varied role. "We don't segment people off into expert teams – we don't have one PS3 or Xbox expert," says Gargan. "All the people that work for us get exposed to the whole range of platforms that we support, so they see everything from high-end consoles to low-end handhelds and have to write for that range of computer architectures.

"And they get to integrate that with codebases. So people will see maybe half a dozen development codebases inside a year; typically when you work on a single game you might see the same codebase for several years in a row. So you get a very broad exposure, which is interesting and really challenging." ■

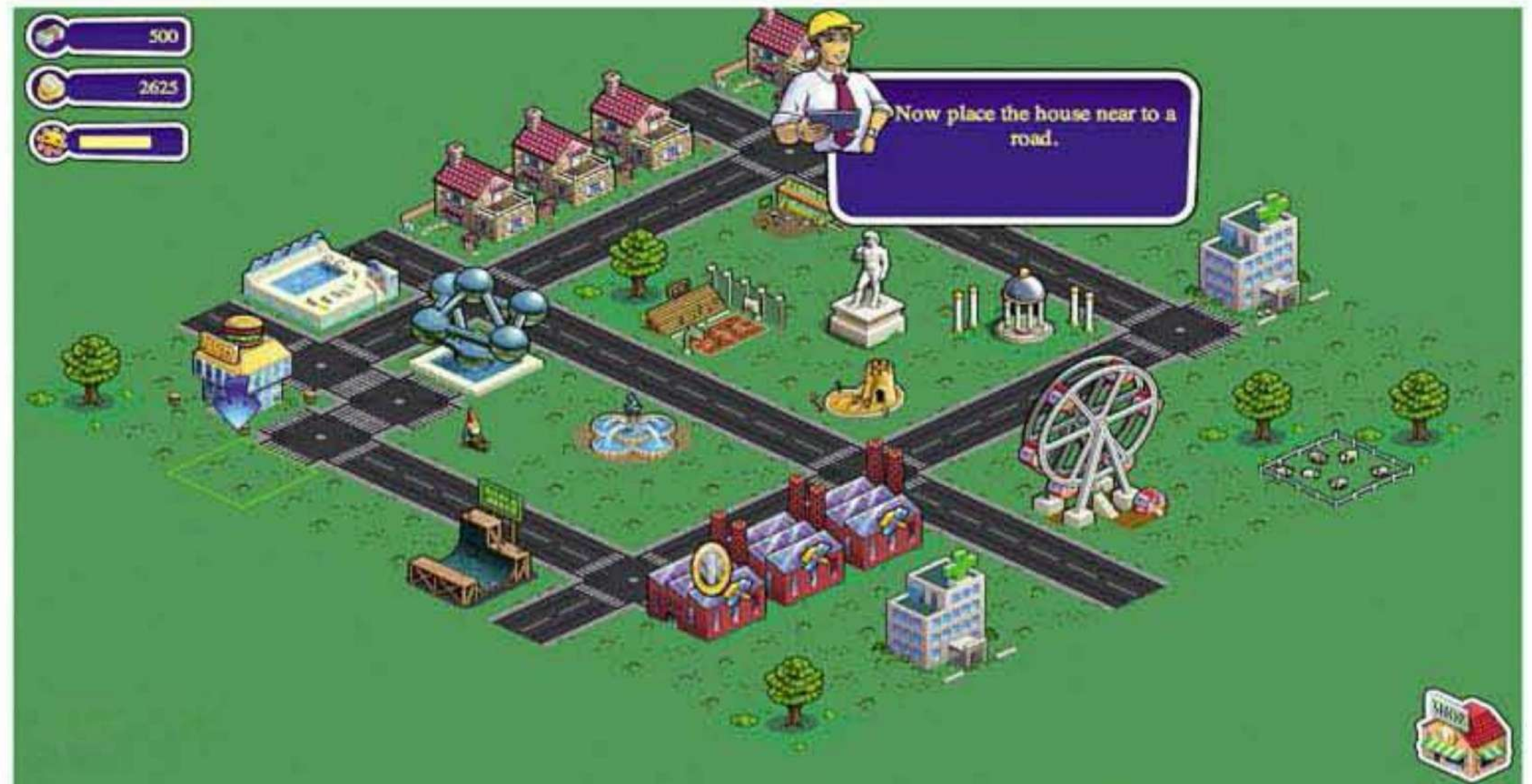


Swrve

This player metrics middleware company is all about attention to detail



Founded 2010
Location Dublin
Employees 15
Key staff Hugh Reynolds, CEO and co-founder; Steve Collins, CTO and co-founder
URL www.swrve.com
Current projects Swrve Platform (currently in closed beta)



A tutorial like this one can have a big impact on early player engagement. Swrve helps developers fine-tune their tutorials to improve usability



STUDIO INSIGHT
Steve Collins
CTO



Technology company Swrve is carving a niche for itself by providing cloud-based tools that will allow developers to maximise engagement. It might sound a little corporately dry, but that the gap in the market was there to fill at all is indicative of the game industry's changing trajectory as it steers towards a future as a service provider, not just a manufacturer.

And Swrve is well placed to help usher in that change thanks to its convincing provenance. Created as New Game Technology by Havok co-founders **Steve Collins** and Hugh Reynolds, the company changed its name to Kore Virtual Machines in 2008, creating a console scripting solution that was subsequently sold back to Havok before a third rebranding saw Swrve emerge.

"One of the real problems today is data blindness," company CTO Collins tells us. There's lots of analytics solutions out there, and you can get lots of feeds from the game and are presented with lots of graphs and it's very interesting to explore those, but what do you do with that? We presenting that in a digestible and actionable way for developers."

Currently in a closed beta with a small number of developers, Swrve's service allows developers to fine-tune their games to the whims and fancies of their players, providing the aforementioned metrics as well as the ability to AB test and manage in-game inventories in a flexible manner.

"Our vision is one in which games are still developed and designed very deliberately, but when it's shipped and in front of the customers, you optimise within the design you've chosen," explains Collins. "So perhaps players are finding it difficult to complete a level, or a jump height in an area is a bit too low, or people aren't buying anything in the game. We give the designers and product managers those sorts of metrics and they can tweak those elements of the game.

"Game developers are the experts because they know what they want to achieve. We're solution providers; we listen to what the experts are asking us to provide to them and adapt our services as a result."

But if game developers are the experts, why do they need Swrve to provide them with statistics they can already access? "The short answer is every team we're talking to or working with right now is so under pressure, there aren't enough daylight hours for what they need to get done," Collins argues. "They're engaging with new customers, rolling out new versions of the games, trying to release new games and create a portfolio of IP that they can manage.

"It's only when you reach a certain scale that you can really afford to invest time energy and infrastructure in doing the metrics gathering and rolling out the content management systems required at this level and to have that engagement with customers. That's big company territory. Any developer will want to be able to have some of this capability internally, but the opportunity cost is there, so they have to balance build versus buy. It's just like any other middleware solution."

Swrve plans to make its platform widely available by the end of the year, but even at this early stage it's receiving considerable interest. "We're only working with a small amount of companies right now, but we speak to large number," says Collins. "From a developer's perspective, we're seeing a huge desire to be able to test their hypotheses, right now: 'If I make a green shield available rather than a blue shield – will people prefer that?' I guess that's the need we're trying to fulfil." ■

Riot Games

The League Of Legends creator puts its focus firmly on the player



Founded 2006
Location Dublin
Employees 50+ by the end of the year
Key staff Brandon Beck, CEO; Marc Merrill, president; Scott Gelb, VP of technology
URL www.riotgames.com
Selected softography *League Of Legends*
Current projects *League Of Legends Dominion*



League Of Legends Dominion **(above) is the forthcoming update to Riot Games' multiplayer game in which teams face off in fantasy combat**

STUDIO INSIGHT
Jennifer Siclari
European marketing manager
Mirko Gozzo
general manager





Riot Games' multiplayer online battle arena game *League Of Legends* had, at the last count, 15 million registered users and sees an average of 1.4 million players every day. With new game mode Dominion on the horizon, those numbers are only set to grow. Though you might be surprised to learn that Riot is much more concerned with keeping its existing players happy than bringing new ones on board.

At one point there were so many players clamouring to play *LOL* that there was a queue of several hours. But no one-arm-bandit-style dollar signs came to rest in the company's collective eyes, rather a look of sincere parental concern.

"Another company might think: 'Bring in more revenue, with customisation options and skins,'" general manager **Mirko Gozzo** tells us. "But we didn't do that – we slowed down our advertising and focused on making sure that players were able to play. Adding a second European platform was a major capital investment, but in the long term, because our players are satisfied, we strongly believe it was the right approach. If you do something for the player, short term it might not make sense financially, but long term it will make complete sense."

Gozzo pauses before continuing: "Many companies can offer a good product, not as many can offer a good service with frequent updates – especially online. Lots of companies will claim they want to make the biggest online game in the world, but we want to be the most player-focused. That means putting the satisfaction of our players before short-term business interests. When we make decisions, we don't normally look at the cost, we look at what our players want."

Surely someone casts half an eye over the cost of the latest noble decision? "Putting players first has always been central to Riot's business, and we believe 15 million players have voted in favour of this approach," Gozzo retorts, smiling, "so it's the strategy we're going to continue to employ." That's us told. Riot's commendable attitude stems from bad experiences suffered by its co-founders (Marc Merrill and Brandon Beck) when dealing with the customer support of other MMOGs in the past.

"If there is no trust, we can't keep the players – that's very important," explains European marketing manager **Jennifer Siclari**. "We don't look at them as consumers, we really look at them as players. Even our customer service department is not called Customer Service, it's called Player Support."

Riot's ability to foster the trust of its ever-growing community is as much down to its excellent service – sorry, support – as it is the strong sense of community that already exists within the company. "During the later job interviews," Siclari says, "you might face up to ten potential colleagues, and every single one of those has to say yes, and feel like they can work with you."

And everyone who has successfully become part of the Riot team is encouraged to mingle with the wider *LOL* community, too: "In other companies, only the community managers are allowed to post on the forums," says Gozzo. "At Riot, everyone is encouraged to post and our job titles are displayed so the player knows who they're talking to. Anyone can answer any subject – you have to do a little training, but we encourage forum posting instead of restraining it." ■



BioWare Ireland

The developer that's building an army of customer service agents

BIOWARE
A DIVISION OF EA

Founded April 2010 (in Ireland)
Location Parkmore, Galway
Employees 100 and growing
Key staff Jason Livingston, director – global customer services; Thor Biafore, deputy director – global customer services; Mike Richardson, director online operations; Gary Molloy, senior human resources manager
URL www.bioware.com
www.swtor.com
www.bioware.com/careers
Current projects *Star Wars: The Old Republic*





Star Wars: The Old Republic **is BioWare's MMORPG set 300 years after the events of its 2003** ***Knights Of The Old Republic*** **singleplayer RPG**

STUDIO INSIGHT
Ruben Cortez
senior director
European operations



If games are to be a service in this new and enlightened age of MMOGs and social networks, then you'd better be ready to deal with the torrent of demanding customers who'll be banging on your door the second that service doesn't live up to their expectations.

Preparing itself for this daunting prospect, EA-owned developer BioWare last year opened a new customer service centre in Galway in preparation for the launch of *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. Supported by the IDA, the centre is aiming to grow to 200 staff by the time the game is released, though for now senior director European operations **Ruben Cortez** remains tight-lipped on exactly how many of those places have been filled for fear of sparking rumours on the game's eventual release date.

The US-based BioWare has chosen not only to support its European customers from Ireland (covering English, German and French speakers) but will also service the game globally from here, too.

"We were looking throughout Europe, so Ireland wasn't the only candidate country, but we chose Galway because of the commitment you could see from the people here to work ethic and quality," explains Cortez. "What we found in Galway was an almost untapped market at that time – there really wasn't much of a presence here from any gaming company. So I fell in love with it because it was my own little corner of Ireland where I could recruit locally, maintaining national pride while at the same time making sure that we could recruit out of Europe as we needed for foreign language support."

Running a service centre is a 24 hour, seven days a week operation, and as well as technical support, accounts and billing, BioWare Ireland's main role is end-game support. This could be as simple as helping a player talk to a vendor or find an auction house, problems predominantly solved by an updated in-game self-help menu, through to more serious matters like harassment or griefing. "Somebody has said something bad about my mum or my dog, y'know", Cortez offers as an example. Between those two extremes, and easily our favourite, lies a breakdown service in which agents will enter the world to help players who have become 'stuck on a rock' or other such game-world hazards.

But providing all of this to the traditionally nocturnal MMOG player raises additional challenges of its own: "While some of our players might play at work, most wait till they get home," Cortez explains, "so our userbase is actually opposite of most businesses for support because ours happen to come in the late hours of GMT or US timezone peaks. We staff according to those plans, so now it's a 24/7 support structure that's the opposite of normal bank hours! [laughs]

"We tend to hire people who not only love working in the game business and what they support, but who're nocturnal anyway because they're up all night playing games as well. I won't be working nights, though – leave that to the guys who don't have a bunch of kids running round the house!"

BioWare's agents must have an acute understanding of the game, they can't just read from a script. But the company's high expectations lead to certain perks. "We have mandatory play time," says Cortez. "We actually put it in people's calendars: 'On this day at this time, get in the game and play'. Sadly to say, I usually don't because I'm distracted, but for an agent it's hyper-critical to know how each MMOG works." ■



Gala Networks Europe

Industry veterans and proven MMOG specialists





Founded 2006
Location Dublin
Employees 120
Key staff Hyun Hur, CEO; Nicolas Pajot, COO; Hyunsu Kim, CTO; David Young, head of marketing
URL www.gala-net.eu www.gPotato.eu
Selected softography *Terra Militaris, Flyff, Rappelz, Street Gears, Dragonica, Allods Online, Canaan*
Current projects *Age Of Wulin: Legend Of The Nine Scrolls,* SEVENCORE





Age Of Wulin: Legend Of The Nine Scrolls **is a free to play MMORPG developed by Snail Game, soon to be available on the gPotato.eu portal**

STUDIO INSIGHT
Nicolas Pajot
CTO



Fifteen year old Japanese company Gala Inc has had a foothold in Dublin, in the form of subsidiary Gala Networks Europe, since 2007. The top-floor site looks out across the city and handles all the distribution, marketing, billing, hosting and customer support for its eight operational games and online gaming portal gPotato, all of which it supports in-house across six different languages. It's undoubtedly a sizeable operation, but despite such scale, Gala Net isn't yet a familiar brand to most UK gamers.

"It's true that the brand isn't that strong yet, especially in the UK," admits CTO **Nicolas Pajot**. "But we're working on that! There are more companies on the market in the UK, and it's very console focused compared to, for example, France or Germany. So it's more difficult for us to grow as fast in the UK, but we certainly will in the future!"

And with free-to-play no longer a dirty word, Gala Networks Europe is beginning to shift its focus from casual MMOGs – though these will, of course remain fundamental to the publisher's business – and setting its sights on core gamers.

"If you look at the free-to-play space, especially the first games that were launched, they didn't really target the core gamers – people who buy and read magazines, follow the news online or have an Xbox and are also eager to play for a game subscription," explains Pajot. "People didn't even know what a MMORPG was. We were marketing our games to a broader audience, perhaps in online videos, for example.

"It's more difficult to market to core players because their expectations are extremely high – their reference is *WOW*. You can't compare *WOW* to a game developed by 30 people in Korea, the scope and gameplay is very different. But this is changing, and our latest games, like *Allods Online* or *Aika Epic II: Exodus*, are much more targeted at the core audience. We've attracted a lot of players coming from subscription-based games."

Gala Networks Europe is certainly taking large strides towards that future, its portfolio of MMOGs providing a broad variety of playing styles for the company's ever-growing audience. And in looking to differentiate itself from established 'high-fantasy' MMOGs, the company is eager to provide experiences that will be less familiar to regular role-players. The first such endeavour will be *Age Of Wulin: Legend Of The Nine Scrolls*, a kung fu-inspired MMORPG, complete with extravagant martial arts aerobatics such huge gravity-defying leaps and the ability to run across water or up sheer walls.

"The content is huge and I think we'll be able to attract a diverse range of players. Those who like to explore will be able to visit locations like the Great Wall Of China and the real Shaolin Temple at the time of the Ming Dynasty. But you can also engage in very high-level, competitive gameplay where you can build a castle with other players and fight to defend it, and you can become the head of the Shaolin Temple and wield political influence."

The publisher is proving itself in that most turbulent of arenas, the MMOG market, and its willingness to exploit new business models and adapt to shifting audience behaviour. Boasting no game closures in the last four years and welcoming a growing number of players hungry for the new massively multiplayer experiences Gala Networks Europe intends to provide, the publisher is rapidly establishing itself as a leading, and successful, free-to-play pioneer. ■



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Trinity College Dublin

A 400-year-old college with its eye firmly on the future of the game industry



Founded 1592
Location Dublin
Employees 2,500
Key staff Dr Patrick Prendergast, provost
URL www.tcd.ie



Among other buildings, Trinity College Dublin's state-of-the-art science facility houses Ireland's first purpose-built nanoscience research institute

COURSE INSIGHT
Dr Michael Manzke
lecturer



The 400 year old Trinity College comes 50th in the Times Higher Educational World University Rankings, and makes the top three in Ireland. Its Interactive Entertainment Technology master's degree offers students an academic grounding in important areas such as mathematics and physics while also offering exciting hands-on projects and weekly seminars from technology providers.

The one-year master's course was initially set up by Havok and Swrve co-founder Steve Collins, whose first company was spawned from Trinity's research group (along with other start-ups including Demonware) several years earlier. In between starting up middleware companies he's even found the time to lecture, though Swrve is his current focus.

"We're not a gaming degree per se, we really try to be a bit wider than that," lecturer Dr **Michael Manzke** tells us. "But what we do is very applicable to [games] and should be useful. We don't want to train people on specific products, it's about giving a bit more foundation at an academic level than purely training people for the gaming industry."

Alumni are installed in companies such as PopCap, EA, Microsoft, Jagex, Double Negative, Climax and SCEE. And during our visit to PopCap's European HQ, which is located, quite literally, just across the road from Trinity, we discover that a group of students working on a project were responsible for *Bejeweled Live*.

Trinity's close industry relations means that ideas for projects and even dissertations regularly come directly from developers such as PopCap, lending students' invaluable industry experience. In fact, PopCap tell us that most of the students who worked on projects with them during their masters are now employees.

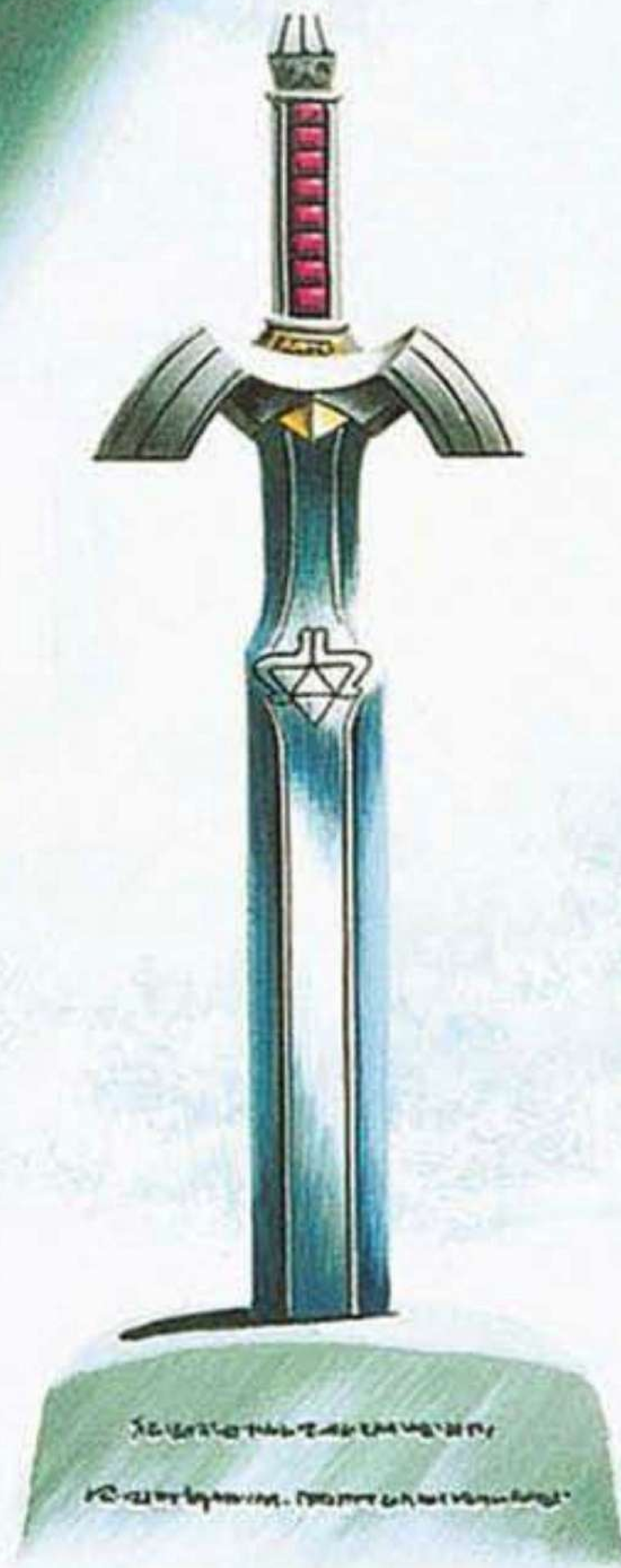
"*PVZ Retina* was recently launched, and one of our interns had a big part in that," PopCap's general manager for Europe **Paul Breslin** tells us. "They get to work on good, meaty projects, and when they leave here they're associated with our titles and have their name on the credits."

But even so, Manzke highlights the increasingly high standards required from graduates entering the industry. Even a masters degree, he says, may not be enough any more. "The students have to apply what they're taught in the context of gaming, but the theory that's given to them should be of a more academic level. On the one hand we want them to enter the industry, but on the other there's the option to pursue a PhD. So we want to bring people up to that kind of level, because I think PhDs are increasingly required in the industry. Some aspects, such as advanced physics, are hard to grasp at the masters level, so you have to spend a little more time with it – time you probably don't have if you're already in the industry."

A current initiative sees the college working to merge technology and the arts, and the Interactive Entertainment Technology master's, Manzke tells us, is the technology sector's extended hand. "We can teach the technology end of development, but we try to team up with art colleges so that the more artistic aspect is integrated with us."

"And we converge our students, too, because we get them from various different backgrounds: some from very strong computer science backgrounds, some from more artistic backgrounds, and they all get together in a group and bring their own strengths. When you look at the course components, you can see that some parts might be more challenging to some students than to others, but ultimately I think everyone will find their place." ■

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